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OPINION PAPER

In Defence of Scholarly Bullshit—a Reflection on Kirchherr

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Abstract
The recent publication by Kirchherr on bullshit in sustainability and transitions studies has generated much contention. In the intentionally controversial paper, the author uses profanity to provoke and shock the readers. He argues that the metric-driven logic of the academic system has allowed subpar scholarship—recognised as *scholarly bullshit*, to permeate the field and that up to 50% of the articles (in particular, those on circular economy) published in reputable sustainability and transitions journals can be considered of generally inferior quality. In this reflection on Kirchherr's piece, I aim to contribute to the debate that the author has instigated by offering an alternative opinion. Namely, I find it necessary to warn against the implications of the negative connotations that the term scholarly bullshit encapsulates since the actual situation in the field may not be as problematic and unfavourable as it sounds. By assessing the arguments presented in the original paper, I explain not only why the existence of subpar scholarship is not a problem but also explicate some positive effects of the phenomenon that make it a potentially desirable element of the scientific publication process. Although I agree with the original paper's overall argument about the increasing presence of buzzwords in recent scholarly work, I conclude that weeding out presumably "inferior" scholarship may lead to a type of "scholarly eugenics", resulting in the loss of the interdisciplinary richness and fertility that have been driving the field of sustainability and transitions so far.

Keywords Circular economy · Scholarly bullshit · Sustainability · Sustainable development · Sustainability transitions

Introduction

In this opinion piece, I want to reflect on the recent publication by Kirchherr [1] that has generated a lot of contention. It is a paper with an intentionally controversial title, aiming to provoke and shock the readers. The author uses profanity as a wake-up call for the slumbering scientific community in the domain of sustainability and transitions studies that has become too complacent to realise the pitfalls of the metric-driven logic of the academic

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system and allow subpar scholarship—recognised as *scholarly bullshit*, to permeate the field. It is argued that up to 50% of the articles (particularly those on circular economy) published in reputable sustainability and transitions journals can be considered of generally inferior quality since they fail to advance the respective body of knowledge. These are recognised to usually fall under one of the five distinct (but not exhaustive) categories: *boring question scholarship*, *literature review of literature reviews*, *recycled research*, *master thesis madness*, and *activist rants*. The author sees the root cause for the proliferation of scholarly bullshit articles in the citation-focused academic system that pushes the scholars in need of funding to write about the latest buzzwords in the field and the journals seeking to increase their impact factors to publish them. In the end, it is argued that the system producing such scholarship is unlikely to change and that the responsibility for reducing the amount of bullshit in scientific publications lies with the authors themselves, who should care less about their h-index and more about the quality of their contributions to the field.

While I, in principle, agree with the paper's overall argument and recognise the increasing presence of buzzwords in recent scholarly work, I believe that the claims put forward by the author should not be taken at face value and need to be placed under further scrutiny. Admittedly, my motivation for this reflection does not lie in the inherent disagreement with the views and arguments expressed in the original paper but in the devil's advocate attitude that inspires the need to question "apparent truths" and argue for the positions that one personally does not maintain. My intention, therefore, is not to criticise the original paper for the use of profanity or the lack of scientific grounds on which the expressed views are based but merely to contribute to the debate that the author has instigated by offering an alternative opinion.

The central argument of my reflection is that although the claims put forward in the original paper may be true (regardless of how scientifically sound they are) and the academic field of sustainability and transitions is indeed ridden with scholarly bullshit, that does not necessarily presuppose the absolutely negative consequences of this phenomenon. While the author points out the proliferation of inferior quality articles and a general tendency of scholars to prioritise publishing on the latest academic buzzwords, any substantial pitfalls that these developments bring about are hardly mentioned in the original paper. Instead, it is argued that the basic issue with such scholarship is that it is pointless and unnecessary since it does not contribute to advancing scientific knowledge on a subject in question. However, in the following lines, I will try to explain why this is not a problem and explicate some positive effects of scholarly bullshit that do not make it just necessary and inevitable but also a potentially desirable element of the scientific publication process.

Scholarly Bullshit—Is It as Bad as It Sounds?

To start, it is important to recognise that the concept of scholarly bullshit appears to be both under-theorised and underexplored. This was acknowledged in the original paper that notes how the phenomenon requires further investigation, although "bullshit" was established as a line of inquiry already in the 1980s [2]. This means that making any value statements about its potentially adverse impacts on a given scientific field may be relatively premature at this point. In other words, academic publications that do not make any notable scientific contributions may not necessarily have negative consequences on the development of a particular academic field as a whole. There is hardly any evidence that they stall scientific progress, nor do they seem to be published at a disadvantage to more quality academic work. While the number of inferior publications may be rapidly increasing, it

does not mean that quality academic literature is becoming hard to come by. Quite the contrary, it could be argued that the level of scientific progress has certainly been on the rise recently and that it is very likely to continue in the future with the increasing number of papers being published and more than ever public and private funding available for research activities. Understandably, it is very much possible that this happens due to the principle of large numbers and that the greater academic output is more likely to produce a work of better quality. However, it is also bound to generate a more subpar scholarship as collateral. Scholarly bullshit may thus be an inevitable side product of scientific progress.

Furthermore, it is necessary to understand that (scholarly) bullshit is not a novel phenomenon. While it may be more evident in the sustainability and transitions literature nowadays, its existence can be documented in many different fields[1], and the scholar to whom the author attributes the invention of the concept [2] contends that 'we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is and why there is so much of it' (p. 2). This implies that the phenomenon should not be necessarily taken as an (undesirable) anomaly in a particular body of scientific literature, but it is possible that it acts more as a regularity in the process of academic publishing. Indeed, it is rather obvious that scholars never really shied away from writing about popular academic buzzwords, and it is hard to see why it is perceived to be more of a problem now.

At the same time, the original author recognises the concept of circular economy as a notable culprit for scholarly bullshit in the most recent sustainability and transitions literature. However, one has to ask if it is not the whole field that lies on the proliferation and perpetuation of buzzwords since there are arguably no greater buzzwords that appear in the respective scholarly work than "sustainability" and "transition". This begs the question of the potentially benevolent impacts of scholarly bullshit on the development of a scientific field of inquiry. Namely, it is safe to assume that the field of sustainability and transitions has seen a fair share of subpar articles published over the years. However, one can wonder if it would turn out to be as scientifically fertile as it is now if it was not for the burgeoning scholarship of inferior quality that kept it in the focus of not only scholars but also policymakers and funders who have been enabling further research on the respective topics, and the mainstream media which have adopted and popularised certain terms, with possible positive effects on public opinion. This means that there are benefits to an academic publication beyond the substantial advancement of scientific knowledge on the topic in question and that such scholarship should not be immediately discarded as pointless and unnecessary only because it is considered scientifically inferior—or plain boring.

Of course, this is not to say that unsound research embodying fundamental investigative fallacies is still worth publishing. In my understanding, such work does not constitute scholarly bullshit since it violates the basic principles of the scientific research process. In contrast, the phenomenon discussed here meets the processual demands for research integrity and validity but lacks academic quality in terms of the content produced.

More than Meets the Eye

An important issue with the phenomenon of scholarly bullshit in scientific work is the lack of understanding of what constitutes such scholarship since inherent disagreements exist on what makes a meaningful scholarly contribution as well. The definition provided by

[1] For instance, MIT Professor Leslie Kaelbling discusses a similar issue in the field of computer science [4].

the author states that '"scholarly bullshit" is defined as scholarship that is so pointless and unnecessary that even the scholar producing it cannot justify its existence' (p. 2). However, the given phrasing is too vague and too broad, offering little ground to further inquire into the issue. It remains unclear what makes such scholarly work pointless and unnecessary or why the failure of a respective author to justify it may signal those characteristics. The paper further adds that 'it is scholarship that does not contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge on a subject at question' (p. 2), which offers some clarity, but fails to establish on what grounds such evaluation should be made. While the categorisation into the five most common types of scholarly bullshit sheds more light on the issue, it considers a variety of vastly diverse cases and their respective traits to allow for any self-consistent definition. Nevertheless, as established at the beginning of the paper, my aim is not to criticise the original work on scientific grounds but to offer an alternative interpretation of the discussed phenomenon. Therefore, while the previous section reflected on the inevitability and potential desirability of the phenomenon of scholarly bullshit as a whole, in the present one, I will try to elaborate on why each type defined by the author may not be as damaging to the academic field as it is purported in the original paper.

The first type that the original paper presents is *boring question scholarship*, which is also considered to be the most harmless since it contributes to the scientific body of knowledge by enhancing its empirical foundations, despite lacking originality. It is even possible that this scholarship does not constitute scholarly bullshit in the first place, as acknowledged by the original author. Although academic literature is flooded with these types of articles, they can be both necessary and desirable as scientific publications. They not only help strengthen the integrity of previous research but can also present the same findings in a new way or discover them from an unusual dataset—both of which may spark novel interest from the scientific community, leading to potentially more ambitious investigations. For instance, I would be greatly surprised if the widely cited paper of the original author that is given as an example of his susceptibility to scholarly bullshit [3] has not inspired high-quality research in one way or the other. That said, some of the "boring" publications may also be a side product of more original scientific work, which means that the scholars publishing them do not exclusively engage with such scholarship but take every opportunity to add to the field's empirical base. Besides that, this type of research is what Early Career Researchers who did case-study work in their PhD (particularly in social sciences) always have to start with, and it usually serves as a gateway to more serious scientific endeavours. Therefore, it is important to note that each publication should not be judged in isolation from the broader corpus of scholarly work produced by each author, a research group, a faculty department, or a loosely connected network of scholars working on the same topic.

While the second type distinguished in the original paper, *literature review of literature reviews*, does not strengthen the empirical foundations of a respective body of knowledge as the first type, it can still make a potential contribution by communicating the state-of-the-art research in a way that is more interesting and appealing to different members of its audience than what is the case with the existing reviews. In other words, although two reviews may do the same work, for some people, one does it better than the other. This becomes particularly important if we keep in mind that sustainability and transitions is an interdisciplinary field populated with scholars of diverse backgrounds, research interests, and methodological affinities. After all, some summaries of the work in the field are often considerably more cited than others, possibly due to their clarity and a communication manner that is found more approachable by certain parts of the scientific community. At the same time, the proliferating academic publications presenting "more of the same" can also increase the overall accessibility of state-of-the-art scholarship to a broader audience,

which is a benefit that should not be underestimated. For instance, they can be powerful instruments to support teaching and inspire some students to pursue a research career and make more significant contributions to the field in the future.

The third type, *recycled research*, is criticised for the opportunistic use of buzzwords from an emerging field of scientific inquiry to promote otherwise sound and quality research work from other fields. This is seen not to genuinely add new insights to a particular research subject but to merely reframe existing knowledge on a related subject. While such scholarship can be characterised as insincere or misleading, even a marginal cross-fertilisation of two different fields of investigation can act to the mutual benefit of both. On the one hand, it brings the attention of scholars to a body of knowledge that they may not have been previously familiar with, potentially inspiring stronger engagement and more genuine interdisciplinary research to follow. On the other hand, rebranding existing knowledge under a more popular frame can help scholars access funding for their research that would not be available to them otherwise while keeping the focus on the research subject they truly care about. Besides that, whether an article genuinely deals with an issue that it declares should not be judged merely by its title or the highlighted keywords but by its content. Although an interested reader can be misled to read this type of article while expecting something else, the same also happens with many other papers that truly meet our interest but lack in quality to enhance our knowledge on the subject or live up to our expectations in another way.

The fourth type, *master thesis madness*, is probably the hardest to defend since it embodies significant quality issues, including theoretical misconceptions and methodological inconsistencies. However, as noted in the previous section, I would not categorise this type of research as scholarly bullshit since it is fundamentally unsound in terms of the research process rather than being of inferior quality in terms of its content. This points to an important logical fallacy in the provided typology. Namely, it departs from the common classification criterion, which is the quality of publication content and moves to the soundness of the research process instead, as well as the credentials and motivations of the authors producing such work. For that reason, my defence needs to take somewhat of a revisionist approach here. The practice of churning out papers without regard to quality is an evident trend in the scientific publication practice. Still, it is hardly one that can be exclusively associated with master students and their supervisors or the publications produced from the master theses. Even if a considerable proportion of published papers based on the work of master students is unsound, it does not mean that there are much fewer cases of flawed research in the rest of the literature. A bad piece of research is just a bad piece of research, no matter who makes it or how! What is more, pointing the finger at aspiring researchers holds an underlying risk of marginalising the work of young scholars who often start with less ambitious academic papers before getting hold of the intricacies of the publication process and proceeding to publish more original scientific contributions.

The fifth type, *activist rants*, suffers from a similar misconception as the previous one since it also represents an example of unsound scholarship rather than a work that merely fails to advance our understanding of a particular research subject. The papers falling under this category are mainly experiential and based almost exclusively on anecdotal evidence. What they may lack in the theoretical and methodological foundations, these works try to accomplish by promoting ideas that embody positive meanings and feel-good attitudes. Although I agree that such flawed scholarship has little to no place in scientific publications, it is necessary to understand that passion and activism are not exclusive only to this body of work but underpin more serious scholarly efforts too. In fact, I would argue that a certain level of passion, commitment, and motivation to contribute to a good cause are

important, if not utmost necessary, to engage in scientific work—not least because the salaries in academia are shamefully low.

In the preceding paragraphs, my attention to the proposed types of scholarly bullshit has attempted to show that although some of them (the first three in particular) may look not to contribute directly to advancing scientific knowledge on a certain subject, they can still hold potential (indirect) benefits for the field that are not so obvious at first. At the same time, the latter two types of such works considered the most problematic, master thesis madness and activist rants, entail fundamental errors in the research process that disqualify them from being understood as mere scholarly bullshit but constitute seriously flawed research instead.

We Are All Prone to Bullshit

The last point in this reflection concerns the question of who produces scholarly bullshit and why. The original paper attributes this to the vicious circle of the citation-focused academic system that pushes scholars to churn out papers containing the latest buzzwords in peer-reviewed journals and those journals to publish them to increase their impact factors. This represents a significant issue in modern academia and one that is hard to dismiss. However, the original paper also notes that the academic system motivating subpar scholarship will be hard to change. So instead, it calls out the scholars in the field to pay less attention to the publication metrics and more to the quality of their contributions in order to alleviate scholarly bullshit.

While this is indeed a legitimate call, I am quite unsure that the root cause of the problem lies with the scholars themselves. The motivation to publish scientific work using popular and fashionable terms in the field is hardly the exclusive consequence of the need to secure promotion and funding for their research, as argued in the original paper. Of course, job security is important, and research funding is often scarce (particularly for some areas of inquiry), but that in no way means that the scholars publishing on the latest buzzwords hold no genuine interest in the topic or are less motivated to produce original research. On the contrary, even the original paper notes that some of the scholarly bullshit is written with incredible passion and dedication that belies the alleged material interests. Personally, I have always been advised by my supervisors to write papers only if I have something (new) to say and not for the sake of having something published.

Moreover, although the claim that scholars write on the latest academic buzzwords because ‘almost any article on the topic will garner at least a modest number of citations’ (p. 5) may be valid, we should not be so quick to assume that it is solely due to their dishonest motivation to gather faux recognition. While the number of citations is an academic standard nowadays, I am more inclined to believe that the authors prefer to write about hot topics in the field mostly because of the potential visibility and impact of their work. The “guaranteed” number of citations that such articles bring proves that their contributions to the body of knowledge on a particular subject are being considered by their peers and that they can reach a wider audience. In fact, I would argue that most scholars today care more about their work being read rather than cited.

At the same time, expecting every researcher to make ground-breaking scientific achievements on a regular basis is unrealistic, to say the least. Throughout our academic careers, each of us will hardly ever produce more than a handful of scholarly publications of note, not to mention any seminal works. The gap between those milestones is usually

filled with more mundane efforts to refine, add to, or reframe ongoing scientific projects and ideas. That may result in the publication of less original scholarly work, but one that is nonetheless important, if not essential, to our intellectual growth and the pursuit of genuine scientific discovery.

Furthermore, the acceptance rates for academic papers submitted to the leading journals in most scientific fields are still relatively low. This means that the apparent increase in scholarly bullshit may only be in absolute terms and that the supposed rate of 50% of inferior-quality articles in the field of sustainability and transitions has not changed drastically from before. Therefore, it is possibly only due to the sheer volume of articles published on popular topics that the phenomenon is more visible nowadays. Indeed, as one of the reviewers of this paper correctly points out, in order to get tenured and progress with their careers, modern academics tend to publish drastically more compared to their peers before them, and that definitely affects the quality of their scholarly output. The original paper also speaks of this by noticing that the research on sustainability and transitions is burgeoning and that even the scholars from adjacent areas of inquiry have increasingly been writing on the most fashionable themes in the field. As noted hereinabove, this would make scholarly bullshit more of a rule rather than an exception in academic publishing.

However, it is also of relevance to point out that the academic publishing process is neither straightforward nor consensual. The original author admits that his paper was initially rejected by the co-editors of the first journal it was submitted to (although at least one of them gave a positive review) and that it took some time before he managed to publish it. This would say that, due to differing preferences, there is no common understanding among the scholars in the field of what makes a publishable piece of work and that it is possible for every article to ultimately find its audience. As witnessed by the original paper, some authors may push hard to publish their work, although they are aware that it is considered subpar by some of their peers. For that reason, we can assume that the perception of inferior scholarship is highly subjective and that other scholars would be able to find much less (or possibly even more!) bullshit in the sustainability and transitions literature than the original author. Besides that, it is necessary to keep in mind that each journal operates under a particular agenda (both explicit and implicit) that mandates what makes a fitting scholarly contribution and what does not. This implies that the supposed prevalence of scholarly bullshit may not be a common affair in the field and that it is an issue plaguing only a handful of journals. Indeed, the original paper names several of them, but that is hardly representative of the whole field.

Lastly, it is necessary to consider the question of who can produce meaningful scientific work in a highly unequal contemporary global academic system. This becomes particularly important in light of the globalisation of academia and the entry of thousands of young researchers from the global South and from BRICS into the sphere of Anglophone publishing. Consequently, the expectation that only original scientific findings should be published is not just idealistic but also bears important equity implications. It advocates for an academic publishing system that favours big well-endowed research teams and acts to a disadvantage of junior/early career researchers who need to start publishing their work based on modest results. Such a system also marginalises those who do not have the cultural and academic capital, linguistic and intellectual "codes", and know-how to play the Anglophone global publication game and whose scholarly efforts may, therefore, appear to be of inferior quality and unworthy of publishing. For that reason, the existence of scholarly bullshit that the original paper posits seems to come from a primarily Eurocentric perspective that could be further challenged from a post- and decolonial standpoint.

Overall, we are all prone to writing bullshit—and for a good reason! Even the original author admits that he has previously done so, highlighting his most cited work as an example. However, I would be careful to assert that scholars do it intentionally or that they have an ulterior motive to produce subpar scholarship. They usually study things they are passionate about and want their work to reach their peers. It is only reasonable that this would create articles that are not to everyone's liking. Simultaneously, those very articles are also shown to receive appreciation and praise from a dedicated audience—the original paper is probably a good example of that. Therefore, I do not think that the sole responsibility for reducing the amount of bullshit in scientific publications (if we consider that necessary) lies only with the authors producing such work but also with a broader academic community that consumes inferior scholarship at an accelerated pace. In other words, to alleviate scholarly bullshit, both science production and consumption patterns need to be changed—in addition to the structural conditions of academic systems and the functioning of commercial publishers[2].

The Bottom Line

In summary, I do not necessarily disagree with the overall argument of the original paper that there is an increasing presence of buzzwords in recent scientific publications, particularly in the field of sustainability and transitions, nor that the current academic system strongly favours the metrics-based evaluation of scientific contributions. However, I am not entirely convinced that the notion of scholarly bullshit, as presented in the original work, offers a suitable interpretive frame to assess and explain this phenomenon. It is mainly because the concept is under-theorised and underexplored—despite its enduring presence. Nonetheless, even if we recognise the respective phenomenon as such, I find it necessary to warn against the implications of the negative connotations that the term encapsulates since the actual situation may not be as problematic and unfavourable as it sounds.

Sustainability and transitions scholars have always been writing about the most popular and fashionable topics, and that has hardly ever affected the quality of the overall scientific output in the field. Besides that, an article has various potential benefits beyond its direct contribution to the body of knowledge on a particular subject. At the same time, it remains questionable if the authors producing a "lesser" scholarship are truly motivated by the need to keep their citation levels high or if there is a genuine interest and passion behind such publication efforts. Naturally, I would argue for the latter.

Of course, I do not want to completely disregard the potentially negative academic practices that the citation-focused academic system encourages, and I sympathise with the original author's frustration when those are encountered. However, if we start applying a type of "scholarly eugenics" with the aim of weeding out "inferior" scholarship, it is very much possible that we could start losing the richness of the potential and the interdisciplinary fertility that have been driving the field of sustainability and transitions so far.

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[2] The debates on Open Science and Open Access can shed further light on the issue.

Declarations

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