The Declining Relevance and Legitimacy of IB Scholarship in a World That Really Needs It

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Any distinctive community of scholars should take time to collectively and periodically reflect on the nature of that community. What makes it distinctive? Where and how does it add value? Who are its relevant stakeholders? In effect, what is our communal purpose? In 2011, at the AIB Annual Meeting in Nagoya, we were given such an opportunity under the leadership of AIB President Mary Ann Von Glinow and the AIB Executive Board. This resulted in an *AIB Insights* article titled "Defining a Domain for International Business Study" (Collinson et al., 2013), and it is wonderful to be given the opportunity to update this article!

There are good reasons to revisit these issues today in light of some unprecedented real-world challenges that add a new level of urgency to our scholarly mission to engage in relevant research. At the same time, however, it is clear that we are not significantly influencing the debates that are shaping our world. Why is that? What most constrains our engagement with a wider set of stakeholders and limits the contribution we could make to solving these challenges? Part of the answer lies in structural and institutional (dis-)incentives that limit our user engagement, our relevance, and our impact. But I also argue that broader changes threaten our very legitimacy as relevant experts in today's world.

New Challenges

We have all witnessed a growing range of globalization-related challenges. These are manifest at several different levels, from protests about the behaviors of global corporations (tax avoidance, labor practices, broad sustainability) to the deterioration of a range of bilateral and international trade agreements and of entire trading blocs in Europe and North America.

There is also a strong and growing perception that globalization brings more costs and risks than benefits. The resulting social and political movements towards disconnection and isolationism through the creation of new protective barriers are arguably more pervasive than the protests triggered by the 1999 WTO meeting. These movements are a feature of the general public mood in a number of countries, not least in a post-election United States and a post-Brexit Britain, rather than being limited to anti-capitalist activists. They are also more strongly linked to socio-political, cultural, and religious rivalries, underpinned by general fears of mass migration and terrorism. These pressures are now driving real change in the policies and practices that affect the forms of interaction, exchange, and interdependence that sit at the heart of globalization.

Economic protectionism driven partly by grass-roots anti-liberalization and anti-elitism is also the product of a persistent "confirmation bias." The high costs of globalization – including the obvious and immediate impacts of mass-migration, major indebtedness for some countries (e.g., Greece), and the additional complexities of ensuring national security against terrorists – are now direct and visible, while in many quarters there is a simple ignorance of the significant benefits of globalization.

Greater global integration and interdependence have created losers as well as winners. In this regard, Milanović Branko's (2016) book provides some insights into the impacts that matter to large sections of the electorate in the United States and the UK. His "elephant graph" shows how global income distribution has changed in the 20 years up to 2008. There is a clear pattern of inclusive economic growth at the global scale, lifting a billion people out of poverty, while at the national level it is equally clear that the wealthy elites have benefited disproportionately.

These trends have significantly increased the disaffection and fear of globalization across influential Western populations. Populist hostility to relatively open borders and the freedom of

movement of goods, services, and skills has arisen for genuine reasons. Unfortunately, some politicians and media channels have fueled this disaffection for less-than altruistic motives and created a harmful backlash.

Our Response?

As a community of international business (IB) scholars we understand these complexities. Our primary remit has surely been to research the costs and benefits of global business systems and educate others about our findings. In particular, considering the challenges to globalization, do we not have a collective responsibility to more effectively demonstrate these benefits?

This does not mean defending current forms of capitalism, market structures, and global organizational forms. As thought-leaders, we should aggressively explore and promote improvements and alternatives to the current forms of global business that will tangibly change lives and life-chances.

Surely, developing a clearer understanding of the processes, practices, and policies that enhance the positive effects and limit the negative effects of globalization should underpin a stronger sense of purpose for our scholarship and our community. But why does this kind of analysis of important real-world events take such a backseat in our research and publications?

Little of this is entirely new to IB scholars. Ten years ago John Dunning urged us to adopt a "responsible agenda" (Collinson, Buckley, Dunning, & Yip, 2006), before that Eden and Lenway (2001) called for that investigation into the central claims of the anti- globalization movement, and now Andrew Delios (2017) has lamented the fact that key policy issues are almost entirely absent from the research agenda of our major journals. Moreover, this complements a larger ongoing debate around the relevance and impact of management and business studies (and the legitimacy of business schools; Pettigrew, & Starkey, 2016) and the social sciences more generally (Bastow, Dunleavy, & Tinkler, 2015).

Without replicating this debate, we can reflect specifically on the potential and actual relevance of IB scholarship in a changing world by asking who our key stakeholders are and whether we have the right kinds of analytical approaches to add value to their efforts to tackle these challenges.

In the 2013 Collinson et al. article we highlighted the strength of IB as both "a distinctive and differentiated field of studies in its own right and one which helps to bridge, integrate and link other disciplines and/or sub-disciplines." This power to combine disciplines and connect them across levels of analysis, from the micro-foundations of decision making to the macro-level patterns of globalization, is needed to address today's "big questions." It is ideal for problem-led, integrative, and engaged research. However, this power remains largely latent. Why?

Key Constraints: Structural (Dis-) Incentives, Declining Relevance, and Questionable Legitimacy

There are three related constraints on our ability to add value to the societies which support us: (1) the incentive structures we are embedded in, (2) the declining relevance of what we know, and (3) the legitimacy of what we do among important stakeholders. Arguably these factors in combination explain why we are increasingly peripheral as a community of scholars.

Structural (Dis-)Incentives

We are well aware of the performance metrics used today to judge the "value" of what academics do on a daily basis. There are specific instrumentalities at work in the UK higher-education system as well as in Australia and elsewhere related to the Research Excellence Framework (REF). These have acted as reward systems for differentiating between high and low performers, as resource-allocation mechanisms, and as drivers of significant behavior change (Pettigrew, 2011). They act at all levels – institutional, disciplinary and individual – of the hierarchy. Add to this the more powerful effect of the strong premium placed on four-star, world-class peer-reviewed journal outputs above all other criteria in the international recruitment of scholars to top universities, particularly in business schools.

I would argue with many others that this strong focus on peer-reviewed papers is at the expense of real-world engagement. On the one hand, as time is our scarcest resource, any time spent on writing in the highly sophisticated, iterative, and painstaking way to develop a four-star publication reduces the time available for engagement with policy and practice. This is a simple resource-allocation trade-off, irrespective of motivation or capability. Second, there is a growing disconnect between these two kinds of activities as peer-reviewed journals become more erudite and specialist, distancing themselves from real-world challenges. Thus, one respected study found that, over a five-year period "if an academic focuses more on producing outputs that are highly cited by their peers, less of their work is picked up by external actors" (Bastow, Dunleavy, & Tinkler 2015: 81).

Declining Relevance

The relevance theme has been the subject of a great deal of discussion. "Physics envy," as it has been termed (Thomas & Wilson, 2011), is certainly part of the problem as the social

sciences have attempted to achieve the precision and certainty that comes from the scientific method of systematic observation, measurement, and experiment, with the formulation and testing of hypotheses. Many argue that this reductionist scientific paradigm does not provide meaningful insights when applied to social systems.

But are we becoming collectively less relevant as applied research and "blue sky"/ theory-driven scholarship become more polarized? Delios (2017) is adamant that this is the case and blames both excessive quantification ("p-values and our 21st century deification of 0.05") and a myopic focus on a select set of traditional IB phenomena.

This polarization between rigor and relevance certainly appears to be happening. At the "sharp end" of top-class, four-star article publishing, the practice of crafting sophisticated, top-rated journal articles is becoming more competitive and specialized, while, at the other end of the spectrum, the world is undergoing fundamental change which requires engaged, user-led, and inter-disciplinary approaches.

Questionable Legitimacy

A scholar who is willing and able to engage has to have legitimacy in the eyes of the users or beneficiaries of the research.[1] Our legitimacy as relevant experts possessing the analytical skills, imagination, conviction, and credibility to shape the practices and policies of real-world decision makers is weaker than ever. This parlous situation partly results from the growing disconnect between the intellectual challenges we choose to focus on and those required to solve the problems that matter to the majority of non-academics. It also results from a broader shift in the way in which expertise is defined, established, or recognized.

In a world where opinions are increasingly shaped and rapidly re-shaped through dynamic social media interactions, the very nature of expertise is evolving. The institutions and structures that authenticate certain kinds of experts and certain kinds of expertise face a strong set of challenges. This is not just a problem of information dissemination, translation, or bridge-building through new media mechanisms. It is more fundamental in the sense that we are not seen by most important stakeholders as qualified experts because our attention is focused on "non-problems" – the trivial intricacies of our ivory towers. Moreover, the legitimacy of expertise increasingly lies in the "proven" relevance of analyses and insights tested through user interaction. The "added value" of different forms of academic production is therefore under scrutiny.

This trend has sharpened more recently with the emergence of an active and widespread distrust of established experts seen to be allied with a dominating elite so that academics and universities are viewed in some quarters as an interest group protecting current patterns of governance and inequality. This perception ignores or is blind to the objective neutrality that normally places scholars some distance from politicians, private consultants, or the media, all of whom have a vested interest in attracting voters or making a profit. Our key differentiator as trusted impartial experts has significantly declined.

Conclusions: Improving Relevance and Re-establishing Legitimacy?

We cannot isolate ourselves from the new realities and we must regain credibility in order to deserve and receive continued institutional support and resources. Reclaiming this support will require a larger proportion of IB scholars to address the questions that key stakeholders are asking and provide actionable insights through intelligent analyses. A small example of this approach appeared in a featured article in *AIB Insights* published soon after the UK voted to leave the European Union. Pankaj Ghemawat sensibly applied standard IB frameworks to empirical data in order to better understand the likely impacts of the Brexit vote (Ghemawat, 2016).[2] Such informed analyses provide a much clearer picture of the pros and cons of such a momentous decision. Unfortunately, the voices carrying these insights were not heard and therein lies our greatest challenge.

As scholars we all recognize how broad ambitions and aspirations to take on the "big questions" often sit in stark contrast to the daily realities of our roles and responsibilities and the institutional contexts in which we operate. However, as a reflective community of scholars, we also need to step back now and see where we fit into the broader context and how we may need to realign our behaviors to some new realities. This does not call for a revolution in engaged social sciences but for a determination to focus more of our work on the complex challenges that our societies face and to get the messages that matter to the people that matter!

If we do not realize the full potential of our superior insights into the determinants, influences and impacts of a globalized world economy then we will have failed to fulfill our role as responsible and accountable members of society.

Endnotes

[1] According to a much-quoted definition: "Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995: 574). Legitimacy underpins the appropriateness, worthiness and trustworthiness of particular organizations in particular contexts. It is therefore essential to the ability of organizations and individuals to hold influence and secure resources (Thomas & Wilson, 2011).

[2] This article invokes "the two laws of semi-globalization" to show that borders and distance still matter so the UK is strongly tied to the EU in terms of trade and FDI. Moreover, misperceptions about the number and influence of immigrants in the UK amongst the general public are evident when we examine the real data.

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