



Bullshit in the Sustainability and Transitions Literature: a Provocation

Julian Kirchherr¹

Received: 15 November 2021 / Accepted: 1 May 2022
© The Author(s) 2022

Abstract

Research on sustainability and transitions is burgeoning. Some of this research is helping to solve humankind's most pressing problems. However, as this provocation argues, up to 50% of the articles that are now being published in many interdisciplinary sustainability and transitions journals may be categorized as “scholarly bullshit.” These are articles that typically engage with the latest sustainability and transitions buzzword (e.g., circular economy), while contributing little to none to the scholarly body of knowledge on the topic. A typology of “scholarly bullshit” is proposed which includes the following archetypes: boring question scholarship, literature review of literature reviews, recycled research, master thesis madness, and activist rants. Since “scholarly bullshit” articles engage with the latest academic buzzwords, they also tend to accumulate significant citations and are thus welcomed by many journal editors. Citations matter most in the metric-driven logic of the academic system, and this type of scholarship, sadly, is thus unlikely to decrease in the coming years.

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

Introduction

Profanity is omnipresent in arts and culture, politics, and business. However, it is not found too frequently in academia (yet). After all, those employing profanity tend to be carried away by frustration and anger — feelings that the textbook scholar does not entertain. Yet,

Highlights

- Up to 50% of articles published in many sustainability and transitions journals may be categorized as “scholarly bullshit”
- Five archetypes of scholarly bullshit: boring question scholarship, literature review of literature reviews, recycled research, master thesis madness, and activist rants
- The share of scholarly bullshit is unlikely to decrease in the coming years due to the metric-driven logic of the academic system.

✉ Julian Kirchherr
j.kirchherr@uu.nl

¹ Innovation Studies Group, Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University, Princetonlaan 8a, 3584 CB Utrecht, the Netherlands

as this provocation argues, profanity can also have a useful function as a wake-up call, which may be needed in academia these days. Accordingly, the profanity the author of this provocation proposes in this work is “scholarly bullshit” — an essential term that should be considered in future writings in at least the sustainability and transitions literature that the author belongs to and perhaps in other fields as well.

Whereas any term including the word “bullshit” may seem odd to feature in a peer-reviewed publication, “bullshit” is an established line of inquiry in the academy, possibly started by Frankfurt [1]. This line of inquiry requires further attention, though. As Frankfurt (2005, p. 2) notes: “the phenomenon [of bullshit] has not aroused much deliberate concern, or attracted much sustained inquiry. In consequence, we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is [and] why there is so much of it.” Accordingly, the first part of this provocation explores the types of scholarly bullshit found in the sustainability and transitions literature; the second part investigates the constraints of the academic system driving this kind of research. The author of this provocation maintains that the scholarly community on sustainability and transitions, ideally attempting to solve humankind’s most pressing problems, can benefit much from this.

Throughout this provocation, the term “scholarly bullshit” (as a sub-category of “bullshit”) is meant to critique the current contributions of many works published in interdisciplinary sustainability and transitions journals and beyond (the title of this work only uses the word “bullshit” for reasons of brevity, whereas it refers to, in substance, “scholarly bullshit”). Up to 50% of peer-reviewed works in the sustainability and transitions literature may be categorized as “scholarly bullshit” (further explained below). Inspired by Graeber [3], “scholarly bullshit” is defined as scholarship that is so pointless and unnecessary that even the scholar producing it cannot justify its existence. In essence, it is scholarship that does not contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge on a subject at question. However, because of the current set-up of the academic system, the scholar feels obligated to pretend otherwise and to continue churning out this kind of work.

A Typology of Scholarly Bullshit

This provocation proposes a typology of scholarly bullshit. A reviewer of this work has asked how this typology has been developed. The corresponding author has read hundreds of articles in the sustainability and transitions literature over the years. Based on this reading, it appears to them that there are currently at least five archetypes of scholarly bullshit omnipresent in the literature (Table 1). This provocation illustrates these archetypes with circular economy (CE) scholarship which is the topical focus of this journal. The typology presented does not claim to be ultimate. However, the author has tested this typology with several scholars who usually found it to be exhaustive regarding inferior research currently published in many sustainability and transitions journals. Readers are welcome to further improve this typology.

The first type of bullshit may be the most common and the most harmless type: *boring question scholarship*. These are articles that empirically replicate previous works. For example, the CE literature includes the many empirical works on CE barriers and enablers for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These papers all begin with the same question, but each is followed by a different dataset. Although this scholarship lacks originality and thus misses an opportunity to significantly advance the field, it does contribute

Table 1 Archetypes of scholarly bullshit

Archetype	Details
Boring question scholarship	Research that explores questions that have been previously explored (and answered)
Literature review of literature reviews	Articles that summarize the field — including various recently review articles on the same topic
Recycled research	Scholarship that stamps the latest academic buzzword on otherwise sound work from a related research stream
Master thesis madness	Shoddy work (empirically thin, false application of theory, conclusions unsupported etc.) that should never make it into a peer-reviewed journal
Activist rants	Scholarship that is based on claims (and exuberance) instead of clear-headed, empirically grounded arguments

to its body of knowledge by strengthening its empirical foundation. This archetype is thus possibly only borderline scholarly bullshit, as also noted by a reviewer of this paper.

One sub-category within this archetype is the *literature review of literature reviews*, which may constitute a more problematic phenomenon. Indeed, this category is growing so fast that this article proposes it as a distinct archetype. Literature reviews are at the heart of this archetype. Evidently, literature reviews can add much to the body of scholarly knowledge — ideally, in the case of CE research, these works may even bring in previous scholarship that is not labelled as “circular economy,” but is about circular economy in substance. This may vastly accelerate CE as a field. However, these works are not the kind of literature reviews the author has in mind with this archetype. Rather, *literature review of literature reviews* summarize a sub-field within the field of CE, although recently this sub-field has very recently already been summarized. This phenomenon is illustrated by the many circular business model reviews out there now which are oftentimes largely indistinguishable. They summarize what we already know and do not bring in any new scholarship in their reviews. While *boring question scholarship* still adds to the field’s empirical base, it is difficult to detect the contribution of these latter works.

Currently, a third archetype in the literature is *recycled research*. Indeed, the substantive ideas behind many topics covered in the sustainability and transitions literature, including CE, have been researched for decades. The CE principles “reduce, reuse, recycle” have even been used for millennia. If scholars from adjacent fields start engaging with the newly emerged field of circular economy research, this is to be welcomed. However, currently, a growing number of scholars who were once experts for product-service systems, material efficiency, or product design appear to have merely re-branded themselves to jump on the CE bandwagon. This scholarship is often of excellent quality, both from a theoretical and empirical angle, but it has not built on the body of CE work because it has only opportunistically employed the term “circular economy,” sometimes even in only its title or keywords, and thus does not truly add to the body of knowledge on the subject.

The most problematic archetypes may be *master thesis madness* and *activist rants*, which both typically include major quality issues. Generally, publishing an article with a Master student in a peer-reviewed journal helps nourishing the next generation of academics. Outstanding scholarship has been produced via such collaborations. However, many in the field of CE may also be familiar with the established professors who push out one co-authored CE article after the other with their Master students in questionable journals

such as *Sustainability*. These contributions appear to be less about nourishing the next generation of scholars, but rather about churning out peer-reviewed papers as fast as possible — never mind the quality. These pieces frequently include a messy (or no) application of theory, no more than a handful of qualitative interviews, an analysis that does not appear to be replicable and/or conclusions that are wide-sweeping, and not backed by the data. Such works undermine the standards of peer-reviewed publishing.

However, this archetype may be not as damning as the final archetype of bullshit: *Activist rants*. The common underpinning of these articles is a certain passion respectively animosity regarding CE. Undoubtedly, such passion can unleash tremendous effort regarding theoretical advancement or data collection that may strengthen our understanding of CE. However, these articles frequently remain experiential instead of turning theoretical and/or empirical; they attempt to build their legitimacy through general, feel-good claims instead of substantive arguments. To illustrate: A reflection about how a scholar refurbishes a 1969 Toyota that is at the age of 30 is not what advances the scholarly discourse, even if it is published in *Nature*. That is, a ‘Fridays for Future’ attitude is ravaging the literature.

The author has (largely) restrained from providing specific examples regarding the five types of scholarly bullshit since the aim of this work is not to criticize scholar A, B, or C, but rather describe a trend that transcends specific scholarly contributions. However, the author of this paper acknowledges, as they were also encouraged by one of the reviewers of this paper, that at least some of their work may also be categorized as “scholarly bullshit.” Indeed, the most noted work of this author, Kirchherr et al. [4], now close to 3,000 citations on Google Scholar, is a treatise on 114 definitions of CE that ultimately culminates in proposing the 115th definition of this very term. The reader is encouraged to attempt categorizing this work in one of the five archetypes proposed in Table 1.

On the Root Causes of Scholarly Bullshit

There appears to be a lot of scholarly bullshit out there. A previous version of this manuscript stated that at least 50% of the articles published in sustainability and transitions journals may be categorized as scholarly bullshit. This figure has also been noted in the introduction. Two reviewers of this work asked how this figure has been developed. The author of this provocation has selected ca. 100 articles published recently on CE in well-known journals such as *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *Ecological Economics*, and *Sustainability*. The author could instantly categorize at least 50% of these articles in one of the five archetypes proposed in Table 1 and thus suggests that perhaps up to 50% of the articles that are now being published in many interdisciplinary sustainability and transitions journals could be categorized as “scholarly bullshit.” Admittedly, and at the risk of turning this provocation into a parody, the author notes that further work ought to be undertaken to strengthen this initial estimate. After all, ca. 100 articles are not representative of the vast scholarly CE literature and any set of articles ought to be coded by at least two scholars to ensure reliability.

The author also maintains that many scholars appear to agree that too much inferior quality is published in many sustainability and transitions journals. For instance, one of the reviewers of this paper noted in their review: “Interesting, provocative article [...]. The author [...] touches a topic that is [...] a reality. I must say that I don’t disagree with the general comment about the load and quality of papers published.” Meanwhile, the editor-in-chief of one of the most respected sustainability and transitions journal wrote

to the author regarding an earlier version of this manuscript upon submission to their journal: “I may meet resistance from my co-editors, but I will defend your paper. This needs to be said.” (Sadly, the co-editors sacked the paper, and it then took a while until this provocation found a home in a respected peer-reviewed journal.)

Additionally, it appears that an increasing number of academicians in the field would agree that the share of scholarly bullshit is unlikely to decrease in the coming years. After all, if one searches journals such as *Journal of Cleaner Production* and *Ecological Economics*, one finds that articles containing the latest buzzwords, such as “circular economy,” are among the most cited pieces. Publishing such works has caused the impact factors of many journals to skyrocket. Accordingly, there is a certain fear among the editors of these journals that they will miss the next highly cited article. At the same time, the sheer volume and growth of this sustainability and transitions buzzword scholarship guarantees that almost any article on the topic will garner at least a modest number of citations.

This all also drives more and more authors into publishing on the very latest buzzword, e.g., “circular economy,” which creates a perpetuum mobile respectively vicious circle (depending on your perspective) regarding publications on such topics. Given this dynamic, the author of this work contends that, at this point, it is very difficult *not* to get a piece entailing the latest sustainability and transitions buzzword published in an at least relatively known peer-reviewed journal. All contributors (journal editors, authors) know they may be producing scholarly bullshit; however, publishing such works is advantageous for everyone involved in this contemporary academic system.

These scholarly bullshit publications, in turn, as also noted by a reviewer of this paper, are driven, from a roots cause perspective, by the need for tenure respectively the aim to secure promotion and funding. Those who seek this are usually required to demonstrate recognition of their work in the scholarly community which is operationalized by having published many highly cited works on a topic that is *en vogue*. People need permanent jobs and the desire to acquire funding and promotions is also understandable. It may thus not be fair to blame all academicians out there for churning out scholarly bullshit. Rather, the focus may be turned to the elites that have designed an academic system that mistakes publishing many highly cited papers for the advancement of science. In other words: the academic system is so focused on quantitative targets that it may have forgotten what these targets were supposed to measure.

Replacing this system with one that eventually produces less scholarly bullshit is no trivial task. Those running this system have proven significant staying power. However, some scholars in the field of sustainability and transitions literature and beyond still appear to/may be able to care about more than their h-index. The next time these scholars embark on a piece of research, they should ask themselves: “Is this me now merely adding to the pile of scholarly bullshit? Or am I contributing to the advancement of knowledge in my field?” And even those scholars who are driven by the metrics of the academic system may find that true contributions could gather the most recognition in the end.

Acknowledgements The author thanks Jeroen van den Bergh for valuable comments on a previous version of this work.

Author contribution Not applicable.

Data availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Competing interests The author declares no competing interests.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

1. Frankfurt HG (1986). On bullshit. *Raritan Q Rev*.
2. Frankfurt HG (2005). On bullshit. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400826537>
3. Graeber D (2018) *Bullshit jobs: a theory*. Simon & Schuster
4. Kirchherr J, Reike D and Hekkert M (2017). Conceptualizing the circular economy: an analysis of 114 definitions. *Resour Conserv Recycling*, 127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2017.09.005>