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Editorial

Practitioners and researchers as alienated lovers in management and governance: A new journal to the rescue!

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Abstract

In the field of management and governance, researchers and practitioners go hand in hand in terms of topical interests and they can benefit from regular thought exchanges and various concrete collaborations. However, an increased alienation between the interests of researchers and practitioners can be observed in terms of different career incentives, organizational targets, and institutional cultures. The goal of this editorial article is (*i*) to pinpoint symptoms of this alienation between researchers and practitioners, and (*ii*) to highlight the need for a forum where high-quality research can be made accessible to practitioner audiences. As an editorial article, this article marks the launch of a new journal—*Public Management and Governance Review*—which aims to provide a platform for researchers and practitioners to interact, reflect, and elaborate in a robust and scientific but also broadly accessible way on various challenges in the field of public management and governance.

Key words

Researcher-practitioner exchange, third mission, new journal, open access, public management, public governance

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I thank Lisa Sauberer—who is not only a great, but also a creative colleague—to give permission to use a picture of her painting for the journal's logo. Lisa's original painting is striking, bold, ebullient, and inspiring. Not coincidentally, these are also the elements that describe the ambitions of this journal.

Last and definitely not least, I thank Michael Katzmayr, Gunther Maier, and Georg Mayr-Duffner for their support in the technical, operational, and strategic aspects of setting up and running this journal on an open-access platform, supported by the library services of the WU Vienna University of Economics and Business. Without them, this would all have remained one of my many abstract ideas.

Let us begin with a metaphor

There is a painting by the Belgian painter René Magritte called *The Lovers II* (a more daring sequel to *The Lovers).* Unsurprisingly, you can see two lovers on the painting; or at least you can assume they are lovers, as they are kissing. However, what is more surprising is that they both have their heads covered by cloth or some kind of rag. Hence, you cannot see their faces, and they cannot see each other's faces either. Their heads are covered, but not at all in a kinky or threatening way. In contrast, consistent with some other iconic paintings of Magritte, this painting also radiates clinical serenity.

For someone—like myself—who contemplates from time to time the *true potential impact* of management and governance research, the apparent alienation between Magritte's lovers might warn of the clinical serenity that typifies how practitioners and researchers increasingly coexist to tackle complex challenges. In the field of management and governance, researchers and practitioners live in the same house and know each other's needs, rituals, and habits. I guess they are even well aware of each other's guilty pleasures, in terms of the wildest career dreams, bucket-list goals, or even legacy aspirations ([1], [2]). However, from time to time, even the most romantic lovers might get increasingly stuck in habits, and seemingly forget why they are lovers in the first place.

To start with, I think it is quite safe to assume that most management researchers are well-informed about practitioners' big challenges. At least, researchers know that practitioners face various challenges, and that practitioner-researcher interaction is crucial for addressing those challenges. Now more than ever, researchers are reminded by funders and university administrations to think, write, and communicate about the practical relevance of their research [3]. Being able to showcase a practical application of a new model, prediction, or classification helps in justifying the research done. This validation, in turn, justifies the funding of the researchers and their projects. Such practically relevant research can then be directly integrated in university teaching, for example in the context of *research-based education*. In doing so, scholars are building an important bridge between their responsibilities as researchers and educators. Moreover, with such a track record of practically relevant research, entrepreneurial scholars may secure consulting assignments, be invited to offer policy advice, or serve on advisory boards. Such activities also strengthen the scholar's connection to their *third mission* responsibility ([4], [5], [6]). Here, *third mission* refers to universities' goals not only regarding teaching and research, but also as regards engaging with various stakeholders and having a societal impact on debates and challenges relating to climate change, polarization, inequality, impoverishment, demographic changes, and migration.

From the practitioners' perspective, there is also a growing interest in the scientific approach, which means relying increasingly on scientific methods to develop, test, and evaluate new

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management and governance ideas. This is also referred to as an evidence-based management or policy development approach ([1], [7], [8], [9], [10]). Moreover, practitioners actively engaged with university lecturers to set up collaborations [11]. For example, students can learn to convert *book knowledge* into practice and see how things are done in service-learning courses, or (PhD) students can be offered internships to develop their thesis or dissertation in close proximity to significant real-world scenarios. Many consulting firms have formalized incentive systems, where employees can take a (paid) break from their job to obtain a PhD degree, eventually keeping scientific research skills and knowledge at a maximal level at the practitioner side. Furthermore, having formalized partnerships with universities can potentially bring some reputational advantages for organizations, as it might signal credibility, robustness, societal relevance, and/or high levels of specialization, in addition to mitigating some risks [12].

Hence, when observing researchers and practitioners from a metaphorical distance, one might discern the silhouette of lovers walking hand in hand during their weekly Sunday afternoon walk in the park. However, even the most romantic lovers may eventually settle into habits that go unquestioned. Over time, the questions that *do* emerge are about what the true thoughts of these lovers are during their habitual walk in the park.

What is on the researcher's mind?

The researcher's mind might lately be heavily preoccupied by the desire—or even the addiction—to have their research published in what researchers refer to as *top* journals [13]. This concept may not always be understood and valued by non-researchers, and understandably so. The concept of top journals is a construct of researchers themselves, and there is little room for practitioner input in defining what such a *top* journal is. They are referred to as top journals because articles in those journals only get published after being evaluated by other researchers (i.e., peer-review). Once articles are accepted for publication in these top journals, they are read by many other researchers who cite them in their own work, preferably also published in top journals. These citations serve as a metric for assessing the *impact* of the articles, their authors, and the journals. Ultimately, it is all about researchers writing for, being evaluated by, and building on other researchers. Practitioners are mostly ignored in all of this [14]. Hence, the more other researchers are impressed by it, regardless of what practitioners think, the more researchers confirm their in-club researcher status. Researchers thus create a researchers-only-club, where (*i*) there are very specific insider rules for good academic writing [15], (*ii*) most of these articles are behind paywalls and not available to the many practitioners who should benefit from the research, and (*iii*) practical implications are in the best-case-scenario only some summarized reflections at the end of scientific articles, and not the reason for writing articles in the first place. And while several seminal articles have identified the undeniable necessity that management and governance research should add in some way to the process of tackling *grand challenges* or *wicked problems*—terms referring to climate change, income inequality, national and international instabilities, polarization, financial crises, eroding democratic institutions, etc. ([16], [17], [18], [19], [20], [21])— it is unfortunately not uncommon to find some articles in traditional *top* journals framing such *grand challenges* and *wicked problems* as great opportunities to advance organization and management theory, rather than focusing on how theory and its pragmatic implications can help address these challenges.

So, the researchers' mind during the Sunday afternoon walk might drift, but is that really a problem? There should be some *me*-time in any healthy relationship between long-term lovers, right? True love is also accepting the other's somewhat awkward guilty pleasures, right? Unfortunately, the reality is that publications in top journals and accumulated citations, have, by far, become the dominant and one-dimensional criterion defining researchers. The

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publication dance is *the* evaluation paradigm for job offers, promotions, and tenure-track decisions; and this dance has become everything except a romantic Tango or Waltz between lovers.

Hence, for researchers, the focus is on academic articles peer-reviewed by other researchers. This should not be misconstrued: I think researchers *should* from time to time publish articles at high scientific standards in very good journals and/or in other scientific outlets. In doing so, they contribute in a robust and verified way to substantial knowledge development—an indispensable part of their societal responsibility, particularly when they are funded with taxpayers' money. However, this way of publishing means that one idea is elaborated per article, and an article is only worth writing if it will pass the show's audition. Concretely, ideas are formulated and elaborated when there is sufficient theoretical grounding, preferably also supported by a bombastic empirical analysis, which all take enormous time and effort to complete. However, the researcher might have so much *more* to say and recommend to the practitioner. Unfortunately, few formats exist to do so, and most of them are not even publicly accessible to practitioners.

What is on the practitioner's mind?

The practitioner's mind might also be troubled during the Sunday afternoon walk. The practitioner's brain is quite fatigued after yet another lengthy and never fully completed internal change project at the organization, sparked by yet another new management concept, guru book, or new technological feature ([22], [23], [24], [25]). It would be amazing to be able to dedicate some time to talking in depth with the researcher during the Sunday walk, but the tiredness and permanent still-much-to-catch-up stress only permits just enough mental capacity for (*i*) a down-to-earth, (*ii*) real-time, and (*iii*) easy-to-digest summary of any of the researcher's recommendations. There is no time, and especially no funding, for a more critical reflection of the theories and methods used. So, let us just focus on: "what is it I should do now?", to be ahead—or at least not behind—the other practitioners.

Moreover, in the practitioner world, it was recently said that "Data is the new oil" [26], and big tech companies are making unprecedented fortunes collecting and analyzing data from customers and citizens [27]. Also government and public administration have seen the value of harvesting the power of data for policy making and/or to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of public services ([28], [29], [30]). Hence, for the practitioner, it is time to think twice before sharing any data with researchers, as there might be more direct value or competitive advantage to be gained from keeping data secured and unshared. Particularly, now that researchers have embraced the opposite trend of making data of all their studies open access ([31], [32]), the willingness and opportunities to collaborate and provide access to data might become even more scarce. Moreover, due to new technologies, sharing data might increasingly entail the risk of making employees, customers, or citizens identifiable, which, in turn, bears the risks of privacy breaches or inevitable negative media coverage for an organization ([33], [34]) .

In sum, while researchers and practitioners in the area of management and governance have much in common in terms of topical interest, there are also inherent differences with respect to incentive systems, desired output, and valued approaches. Many opportunities already exist and are cultivated to minimize or counter these differences, all with the aim of benefiting from the commonalities in topical interests between researchers and practitioners ([35], [36]). Nevertheless, that does not mean that nothing more can be done or should happen, particularly regarding countering some of the issues pinpointed by the metaphor of two alienated lovers.

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Therefore, the goal of this article is to kick off a new journal: *Public Management and Governance Review*.

A new journal for researcher-practitioner thought exchange

With *Public Management and Governance Review*, we aim to build bridges between researchers and practitioners. Authors are researchers and practitioners who write for other researchers and practitioners with public impact in their daily decisions. However, in terms of content, detail, and recommendations, we aim to go far beyond abstract social media post or too simplified and short blog posts. In this journal, we invite authors to provide detailed and critical recommendations for practitioners to deal with the challenges they encounter as policy makers, managers, and/or politicians. Recommendations should be derived from a high-quality scientific approach, and we expect authors to support their detailed recommendations with insights from their work, their understanding from the scientific literature, cases they encountered and elaborated for teaching purposes, and new data they collected. Consequently, we invite authors to particularly write for those practitioners that are interested in applying critical thinking to their daily decisions and who value a scientific approach for the purpose of better decision-making.

Public Management and Governance Review provides researchers and practitioners with a platform to share ideas and insights that relate to concrete management and policy challenges. Moreover, it offers the possibility to identify and describe new topics and trends that enable more and stronger bridges between researchers and practitioners. For example, by identifying relevant new topics, trends and challenges, a common basis is developed for both researchers and practitioners to build on through the exchange of ideas, concerns, and solutions. Consequently, we also invite authors to share concrete descriptions of new data—quantitative and qualitative—that can fuel practical debates and more accurate decision-making.

Building on the issues identified through the above metaphor, I outline some strategic considerations made for the conceptualization of *Public Management and Governance Review.* These considerations should maximally serve the purpose of de-alienating practitioners and researchers.

Focus on practical recommendations, with scientific quality and for public impact

The main target audience of *Public Management and Governance Review* are decision makers who want to read, explore, and critically reflect on how concrete policy and management recommendations for their daily decision-making are scientifically supported. Moreover, the aim is for decision makers to find inspiration in the journal, based on practical and relevant explanations of core concepts and associations between those concepts that are central in new scientific debates. Therefore, we consider it very important that such core concepts and argumentations are given sufficient attention in the journal, with clear clarifications, examples, and/or guiding questions that practitioners can rely on to navigate their complex environments. Similarly, data and analyses are reported in *Public Management and Governance Review* to provide insights and workable propositions to build on and experiment in impactful decision-making.

Hence, we invite researchers and practitioners to write their article with a focus on (*i*) concrete problems and challenges identified for and by practitioners and (*ii*) recommendations to tackle these problems and challenges. Evidently, these recommendations can and should be well supported with (*iii*) available literature, empirical findings from (combinations of) studies,

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theoretical considerations, and/or case-based evidence or experience. In other words—and in contrast to the traditional focus and structure of scientific journal articles—the practical relevance and implications of the article should not be a stylistic requirement in the introduction or conclusion section of the article. In contrast, it should be the core of the article, even the reason for writing the article.

Articles will be published open access, to ensure practitioners in any type of organization have access to them.

Reviewers: Sparring partners, rather than gatekeepers

In traditional journals, reviewers play a gate-keeper role. This means that they can be considered anonymous representatives of a journal's readers, with the aim of keeping the journal's content at high-quality standards. In that role, they advise the journal editor on whether an article should or should not be accepted for publication. The blind peer review system in many other journals aims to reduce bias, as reviewers may not personally know the authors. However, it also gives reviewers the anonymity that might trigger some of them to become plain rude and disrespectful [37]. This might reduce their reviewing to an almost automated procedure of merely checking boxes about methodological requirements or citing their (own?) articles from the literature.

For *Public Management and Governance Review*, articles are invited by (guest) editors, and once articles have been submitted, expert reviewers are involved to provide additional feedback. Given the mission of *Public Management and Governance Review*, articles will be read before publication by other scholars and/or by practitioners, less with the aim to advise the (guest) editor on publishability, but directly to advise the authors on where they can sharpen their argumentation, clarifications, and/or the actionability of their recommendations. While we might refer to them as *reviewers*, we have the concept of *sparring partners* for authors in mind, and not *gatekeepers*. Consequently, authors—who keep copyright on their articles—are fully responsible for the content of their article (and *not* the reviewers). Therefore, in this journal, reviewers can be openly acknowledged in general or for each article separately, recognizing the contributions that reviewers add to articles. Additionally, it is the (guest) editor's responsibility to identify and invite relevant contributions that aligns with the journal's mission. Hence, (guest) editors coach authors to make their article as relevant as possible in term of practitioner recommendations and/or fueling an inspiring debate between researchers and practitioners.

No particular structure or word count

As the focus is on recommendations for practical problems, we do not apply a strict predefined structure or word count. Some recommendations can be made and clarified in a straightforward way, while other recommendations need more clarification, nuance, and contemplation. The structure and length of the article thus depends on the author's contribution. However, we urge authors to pay attention to the following elements: (*i*) Clarify and explain core concepts adequately and with sufficient detail; (*ii*) Provide (intuitive) examples as additional material; (*iii*) Avoid unnecessary complex formulations (particularly regarding methodological elements); (*iv*) Add figures and tables as they can help explain core concepts and reasonings. Make figures and tables as self-explaining as possible, but also provide enough clarification on them in the text to ensure unambiguous interpretation; (*v*) Formulate recommendations in a constructive way, while illustrating how they can be practically implemented.

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Context- and language-adjusted

While *Public Management and Governance Review* is an English language journal, some articles are published in German or in other languages. The language can be chosen to adapt articles to a specific target audience, and examples and clarification can also be tailored to the language and context of the audience. Translations of published articles to other languages are also possible and will be made available as supplementary material on the online journal platform. There is no need for strict translations because elaborations, clarifications, and/or examples can be adapted to diverse target audiences with other languages. In these translations, it is necessary to refer explicitly to the original article.

Conclusion—From Magritte's Lovers to Klimt's Kiss?

This article marks the starting point of—hopefully—a thoughtful, constructive, and inspiring endeavor for many researchers and practitioners. The journal *Public Management and Governance Review* is launched to provide an open-access publication platform that supports an even better interaction between researchers and practitioners. This will benefit practitioners as they are offered scientifically supported recommendations, guidance, and inspiration. It will also benefit researchers, as they can write in this journal in an impactful way, without restrictions in terms of insider-researcher-club requirements or traditions. In other words, this journal is an attempt to de-alienate two lovers and remove the veil between research and practice. Hopefully, in doing so, I can write a new editorial in a few years from now, this time invoking a metaphor from the painting of the Austrian painter Klimt, *The Kiss*.

Author bio

Jurgen Willems is, since 2019, professor for Public Management & Governance at the WU Vienna University of Economics and Business. He is also academic director of the Executive MBA program on Healthcare Management at the WU Executive Academy. His teaching covers various management topics, including Organizational Behavior, Management & Digital Transformation, and Public and Nonprofit Governance. Jurgen Willems has been a visiting scholar at the University of Southern Denmark, the American University in Washington, l'Université de La Réunion, the University of Missouri, and the University of Texas at Austin. His research covers a variety of topics on citizen-state and citizen-society interactions. Since the publication of this editorial article, Jurgen Willems is also the founding editor of *Public Management and Governance Review*.

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