

How Does Scientific Argumentation Differ from the Opinion of Scientists? A Response to Siegel (2022)

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Recently, the Journal of Management Studies (JMS) has published an interesting debate on the Responsible Research in Business and Management Initiative (RRBM) and the role of our research for the benefit of society, organizations, and workers (Siegel, 2022; Tsui & McKiernan, 2022). While this discussion published in the JMS Point-Counterpoint section is very relevant, in this blog we want to raise some issues in response to Siegel's (2022) contribution. The discussion published in JMS was meant to provoke debate, and explicitly aimed at capturing 'extreme opinions'. The question, however, is where are the boundaries of such 'extreme opinions'? What does actually constitute valid academic argumentation? In this blog, we problematize some of Siegel's statements. Siegel has an extended publication record in top-tier journals, as well as editorial positions, including a former editor-in-chief for JMS. He, therefore, carries an additional responsibility due to his elite status. Likewise, his former editorship of JMS may have given him a special status, which allows him greater freedom in writing compared to those who may not have such privileges. At the same time, critique on his work is more difficult to publish, based on his elite status.

Siegel's Perspective

Siegel takes a radical approach to the responsibility of management academics and warns against a growing obsession with 'social issues' at the expense of 'central managerial and strategic issues' such as worker and firm performance (p.1467). We appreciate his openness in stating his own personal and professional values when he writes that: "In my opinion, executive decision-making should be focused primarily on profit maximization, or more precisely, on shareholder wealth maximization, since shareholders are the owners of the firm" (p. 1647). Many scholars will recognize such statements as neoliberal. While such free-market radicalism holds that everything is permitted for the realization of organizational profit, the externalities are too quickly dismissed or simply ignored. For instance, when shareholder value is prioritized beyond anything else, it leads to undue short-term risk-taking, economic bubbles, and financial meltdowns (Conyon et al., 2011). Moreover, if one follows the perspective that organizations should only care about shareholder value, it is entirely normal to destroy the planet, such as by exploiting natural resources and producing carbon emissions (Davis, 2021).

Because personal values influence our research (Davis, 2021), it is valuable that Siegel (2022) expresses his political stance. His arguments represent the hegemonic belief still popular across many business schools, an opinion that is based on a privileged Euro-Western position. Such opinions are sticky, even despite the ever-growing evidence of the human and planetary costs of a political-economic system in which organizations are encouraged to prioritize shareholder value beyond all.

However, the contribution of Siegel (2022) becomes much more problematic following his statements about the erosion of property rights, individual liberty, and personal freedom due to...

“[...] our new bureaucratic masters: unelected public health officials. That is because the public health police state has engaged in the single greatest act of collective theft of private property and services, disruption of economic activity, modification of business models in many industries, and severe restrictions on mobility and social interaction in modern times (p.1647).

Here, the boundaries of legitimate academic debate become dangerously blurred (Walter & Drochon, 2022). Using terms such as ‘unelected public health officials’, ‘health police state’, and ‘collective theft’ has to be scientifically scrutinized. While we agree that it is important to remain critical of the political system and democratic process, the use of these words has to be understood in the contemporary political context of the US. For instance, in the US, people have received jail sentences for sending death threats to ‘unelected health officials’ (District of Maryland, 2022). Hence, such words are dangerous, as they resemble extremist right-wing voices. The suggestion that ‘unelected public health officials’ have developed a ‘health police state’ that has engaged in ‘collective theft’ of private property and personal freedoms is directly flirting with such extremist views *and* action. Particularly, they are reminiscent of those words used before the Capitol Attacks of 6 January 2021, which represented an attack on democracy itself. For example, the Proud Boys, an extremist, violent, right-wing group in the US associated with the January 6 attacks (New York Times, 2022a), have also attacked public health officials (SPLCenter.Org, 2022). Distrust of public officials and rejection of the political system are closely aligned with contemporary, right-wing conspiracy thinking (Walter & Drochon, 2022), and the words of Siegel (2022) sound similar. The question is whether this is merely an extreme opinion, or the opinion of extremists. Siegel’s statements were not evidenced in any way, lacked references to empirical evidence, and did not include any academic argumentation. This is a worrying sign, especially given the piece is written by an honorary scholar and former editor of JMS.

This raises the question of what constitutes legitimate academic debate. Academia exists for the production and dissemination of knowledge (Bleiklie & Powell, 2005). Such knowledge must be produced adhering to epistemological frameworks based on evidence and rational debate. Moreover, we argue that *personal values* matter in our scholarship. Respect for humanity, and in extension the well-being of our planet, has been central in our own scientific work. Siegel’s words may contribute to a further undermining of democracy and human dignity, while at the same time creating legitimacy of violence towards people merely serving their country. The recent attacks on the husband of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, indicate the precarious nature of contemporary politics, and rising extremist right-wing violence (New York Times, 2022b). It is important that in our scientific outlets we are careful with the use of unevidenced and weighed wordings.

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