
EDITORIAL POSTLUDE

HERBERT JACK ROTFELD

Researchers, Scholars and Ivan

Over the decades, schools of higher education seem to evolve, or at least change. Colleges that in the 1970s had some moderate expectations for faculty research activity changed their names to universities, started doctoral programs, and now require faculty to produce “significant” research publications for tenure or promotions. Other schools moved from expecting minimal evidence of research to requiring publications in “major” journals. Where business faculty used to be professionally qualified by running consulting businesses, they now have to obtain doctorates and publish research work on a regular basis. Unasked is whether the proliferation of researchers and their output is desirable. In some ways, there is a potential value to have faculty doing research that isn’t good enough to be published in *Journal of Consumer Affairs*. But to have that value, the faculty themselves must be wise enough to perceive it.

It was my first-ever academic job interview. Riding into town from the airport with the department chair and his wife, he asked what I thought was a simple and innocuous question: why did I decide to get a doctorate? To me, the answer was obvious. I entered a doctoral program because of a deep and intense curiosity, a love of learning, and a nearly pathological enjoyment of reading. At least, the answer seemed simple enough to me. But the response of the experienced faculty member at the small school implied it was strange.

“Were your parents humanities professors or English teachers?” he asked. No, I said, Jewish. (Alas, I don’t think he understood the joke.)

At the time, his reaction was puzzling. I went through undergraduate and graduate programs surrounded by people who enjoyed thinking and scholarship, as well as reading and talking about ideas. Only after I actually held the rank of assistant professor at schools without graduate programs did I encounter people who pursued a doctorate with the sole goal of possessing a teaching certificate to be university faculty. Some

Herbert Jack Rotfeld (Rotfeld@auburn.edu) is the editor of *Journal of Consumer Affairs*.

were that strange breed of anti-intellectual doctorate-holding college teachers who forever ran classes using the same notes that were originally compiled during graduate school. Others used the prestige of their offices to run lucrative consulting businesses. Some people got into business education *not* because of a love of scholarship, but because they were not very successful as business professionals. Of course, the lack of administration-imposed faculty research productivity requirements didn't stop most other faculty from discussing new ideas with colleagues. It just wasn't required.

Such places are now hard to find, that is, if they still exist. These days, the faculty not involved with research are those whose activity ended after a tenure decision or when they attained the rank of professor. There are instructors, and temporary faculty, or long-time lecturers, but tenure track positions require research. And the demands of what it means to actually conduct research goes up every year. Universities want the income from outside grants. Deans demand that faculty publish increased numbers of manuscripts in "elite" journals so they can aspire to claiming leadership that improved their rankings as a top research university.

Thirty-five years ago, it was rare to find doctoral graduates in communications or business who had presented papers at national conferences or had articles accepted for publication in journals. Today, journal publication is almost a prerequisite for landing a first job. Yet, while these new graduates all "do research," they run studies that sometimes seem focused on the data generated instead of understanding any new ideas or answering some interesting questions.

The dominant model of research has become a simple directive→ "Find data. Analyze it using big hairy models."

Many papers sent to journals seem driven by a desire for a new data set, or claims of conducting an experimental approach no one has done before. More people holding the title of professor do research, but it is uncertain if they all actually think about what they are doing.

Part of the problem is that graduate education on research methods focuses on collecting data, sophisticated data analysis or memorizing lists of theories, while omitting how the latter one provides the basis for the other two. If doctoral students learn a format for writing journal articles, the process is treated as akin to that of a form to be filled out and then sent to an editor.

Over the course of innumerable years as a member of journal editorial boards and, for the past decade, as journal editor, I've endured too many research manuscripts in which the background literature only provides an

eclectic ill-conceived effort to cite all articles that might have been written on the topic. Relevant literature would be listed, but not integrated, then ignored in planning the research or interpreting the results. Too often, too many times, in too many research manuscripts, it appears as if the data were collected first and the literature review slapped around it later. Sometimes, after editorial reviewers note additional relevant theory or research that could impact the conceptual context or the interpretation of data, these authors would add the references to their list with a gratuitous vapid in-body citation, not even appearing to have read the recommended articles.

At the same time, the data would be subjected to all manner of strained efforts of analysis to provide the illusion of earth-shaking findings with a study of minimal import drawn on shaky assumptions. Ignoring pragmatic trade-offs in research execution, the very end of the manuscript notes what could be fatal conceptual or methodological flaws in a throwaway list of “research limitations” in the final paragraphs.

This problem on data over thought is not new. Over a half century ago, Stefan Valvanis (1959) criticized econometric analysis, writing that “Econometric Theory is like a exquisitely balanced French recipe, spelling out precisely how many turns to mix the sauce, how many carats of spice to add, and for how many milliseconds to bake the mixture at exactly 474 degrees of temperature. But when the statistical cook turns to raw materials, he finds that hearts of cactus fruit are unavailable, so he substitutes chunks of cantaloupe; where the recipe calls for vermicelli, he uses shredded wheat; and he substitutes green garment dye for curry, ping pong balls for turtle’s eggs, and, for Chalifougnac vintage 1883, a can of turpentine” (p. 83).

In several past *JCA* editorials, I have mentioned the problems of academic authors who don’t read, or who feel a theoretical context for the research is irrelevant, or who gather data because student samples are available. Too often, data are endlessly analyzed without much of a glance to considerations as to why it should matter in the first place. Since *JCA* deals with important issues of consumer protection, manuscript introductions often run through a litany of news stories saying why the broad subject is a hot topic, instead of first coming up with an important research question, a context, of why this new data pile should matter other than the self-evident hotness of the broad subject.

In the 21st century, there is the added wrinkle of the university administrators who push for as much research as possible to be grant-driven, resulting in studies that only address topics that some entity is willing to fund. With an increasingly business-centric government and

public interest organizations on the wane, this could eventually mean that many important questions on the consumers' interests would become lost in the limbo of things never studied because no one is willing to pay for it. This, too, is a case of data being analyzed without first looking at why it should matter, or not admitting that it matters only because it brings in money to the university.

The more important question is whether new social science doctoral students, at any level of their training or classes, cover relevant theories of their fields with a critical review of the background, history, applications and assessments of how research on the consumers' interests can or cannot actually use those perspectives for making public policy recommendations. The pragmatic use of a theory would be its ability to predict what would happen in a given situation where a decision is to be made and new data might not be immediately available. To their detriment, the faculty and their students perceive theories as little more than lists of articles.

*Centauri Minister of Planetary Security (1990s television series "Babylon 5"):
"Details are important. If you cannot say what you mean you can never mean
what you say."*

As the doctoral student applicant interviewing for our open faculty position ran through her research presentation, she kept on referencing her "behavioral measures" of subject responses to the advertising messages in her stimulus-response experiments. Finally, a junior colleague by my side whispered a question, "Did I miss something? Did she measure any behavior changes?" Actually, she didn't. She was from that self-contradictory body of researchers who claim they are ignoring consumer thinking in order to hold research variables constant, while defining behavior to include subjects answering a questionnaire of what they are thinking. Changes in behavior are changes in responses on a questionnaire, while the subjects' answers are presumed to correlate with actual behaviors in that life simulation known as reality.

And while this same faculty candidate persistently asserted that she wanted to teach our advertising course, she seemed woefully ignorant of basic business practices. Her doctoral research was on advertising efforts aimed at influencing public health practices, but she didn't know anything of the nature of Public Service Announcements as media vehicles' donated time and space. She possessed technical knowledge of studies of persuasive communications, but she had never read anything about the work, jobs or even job titles of people who prepared those communications. She knew a little of general communications theory,

but nothing of the communications businesses. It was not her business ignorance that bothered me, but her insistence that running her experiments were more important than reading about ideas of what could place her studies in the realm of pragmatic significance.

In short, we were interviewing a researcher, not a scholar. She was interested in data, not ideas.

Ivan Preston: "The lawyer told me past court cases established that no one believes advertising puffery claims or what they imply. I wanted to know what was their evidence for that decision."

As Ivan became involved with consumer issues in the early years of an academic career spanning almost five decades, he noted how many business critics blamed the mass media for powers it did not possess (Preston 1969). However, he also discovered that with advertising regulation at the Federal Trade Commission, the rules and case law were based on the reality of how mass communications worked (1974), despite an illogical puffery exception that seemed most vexing. While it was logical that people would not believe certain claims, to universally consider specific literal terms always incapable of deceiving anyone seemed inconsistent with basic communications theory at best, and at worst, allowed people to actually be deceived.

To answer his question, the lawyers provided a court case which established the "truth" of puffery's inability to deceive by citing an earlier court case. That is how the common law works. A finding of a prior case does not need to be endlessly retried and proven time and again. However, this also failed to indicate what evidence was used to prove no one believes advertising puffery.

Thus, finding the answer he sought became more difficult, requiring him to learn a new research skill in legal analysis and assessments of case law. If you have not been to law school, I assure you, this is not an easy task, especially in the seemingly ancient time when you had to cross-reference court citations using publications printed solely for the purpose of listing cases that are cited and what they cite.

He eventually found that the "proof" that no one believes puffery or what those literal claims imply is simply that a case of British common law in 1602 said it is so (Preston 1975, 1996). What he produced from his research was a book, a second book critically assessing how those findings impact advertising practice (Preston 1994), a revised edition of the first book looking at research on how consumers actually respond to puffery claims, and he gained a life's work where he influenced regulatory law. He influenced doctoral student scholars at Wisconsin

and other universities who sought to a way to save the puffery term and apply it using the appropriate legal terms with the application of potential communications research evidence (e.g., Richards 1990; Rotfeld and Preston 1981).

After he retired and the books were done, he encountered a researcher who claimed to possess a legally relevant way to view advertising information. He disagreed, with the resulting Preston-typical detailed assessments and examples too lengthy to fit into a single article that we eventually published in two successive issues (Preston 2002, 2003). Still later, he went full circle to commentaries akin to his first article in *JCA* in 1969 as he reviewed communications research in a legal and ethical context (Preston 2009, 2010).

Ivan wasn't a researcher. He was a scholar. And therein lies the important difference.

In theory, as some people like to say, faculty are paid to publish research because it feeds their teaching. Not necessarily that it makes a person a better teacher per se (because that entails all sorts of things with presentations, style and so on), but because it keeps them current and involved with the "cutting edge" of the work. Many universities encourage research because of the prestige involved with certain researchers, but as anyone knows, a lot of bad research is published and never read. Yet even bad research, if approached in a scholarly fashion, could provide a force to keep faculty aware of new ideas, preventing their knowledge from drifting into the archaic and irrelevant while their minds slowly churn into a dendrite power barely capable of keeping track of the list of mutants in *X-Men* comic books.

Faculty are researchers and teachers. But at too many modern schools, there's no time for scholars.

REFERENCES

- Preston, Ivan L. 1969. Observations on the Consumer's Use of the Mass Media. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 3 (Summer): 59–72.
- . 1974. Reasonable Consumer vs. Ignorant Consumer: How the FTC Decided. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 8 (Winter): 131–143.
- . 1975. *The Great American Blow-Up: Puffery in Advertising and Selling*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- . 1994. *The Tangled Web They Weave*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- . 1996. *The Great American Blow-Up: Puffery in Advertising and Selling*. Revised edition. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- . 2002. A Problem Ignored: Dilution and Negation of Consumer Information by Antifactual Content. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 38 (Winter): 263–283.
- . 2003. Dilution and Negation of Consumer Information by Antifactual Content: Proposals and Solutions. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 37 (Summer): 1–21.

- . 2009. Understanding Communication Research Findings. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 43 (Spring): 170–173.
- . 2010. Interaction of Law and Ethics in Matters of Advertisers' Responsibility for Protecting Consumers. *Journal of Consumer Affairs* (Spring): 259–264.
- Richards, Jef I. 1990. *Deceptive Advertising: Behavioral Study of a Legal Concept*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Rotfeld, Herbert J. and Ivan L. Preston. 1981. The Potential Impact of Research on Advertising Law. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 21 (April): 9–17.
- Valavanis, Stefan. 1959. *Econometrics: An Introduction to Maximum Likelihood Methods*. New York: McGraw-Hill.