

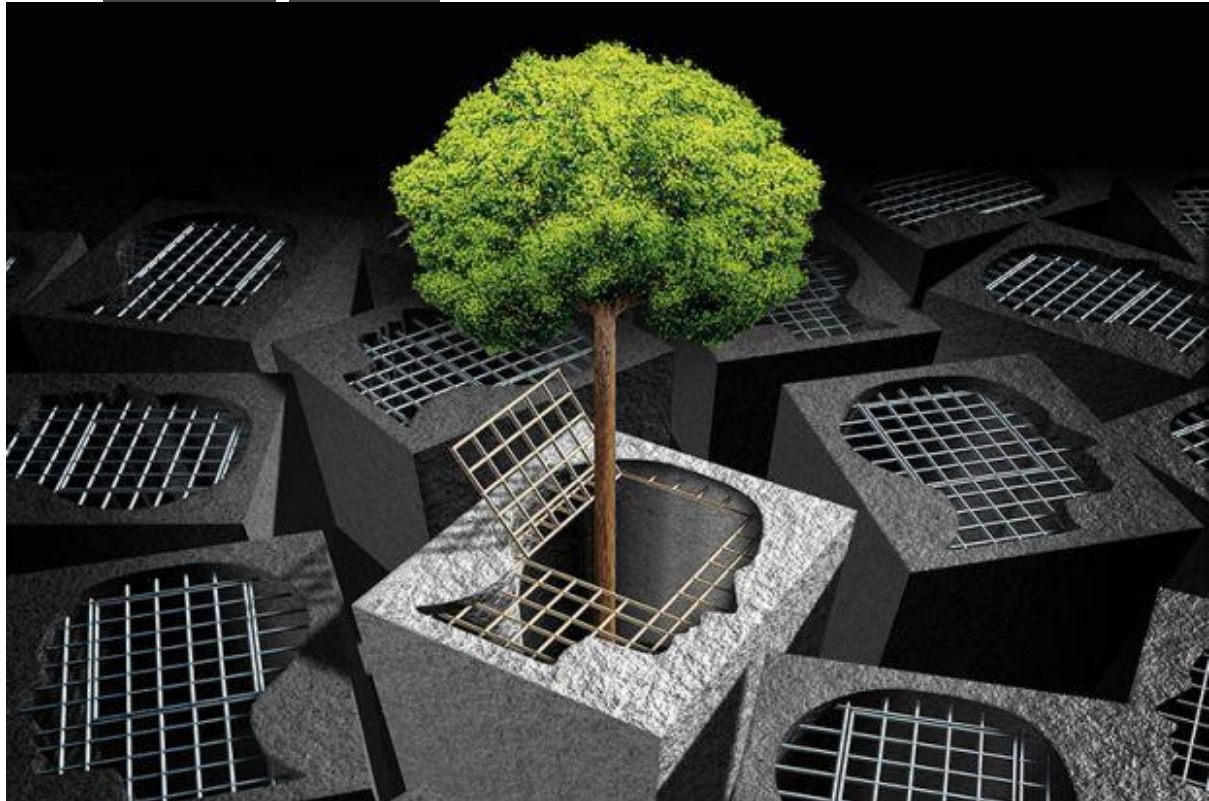
Failure isn't the only teacher. Journals must overcome negativity bias

Studying institutional success stories is socially useful and has nothing to do with selling out, say Matthew Flinders and Paul 't Hart

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The Nobel prizewinning economist Elinor Ostrom once challenged her academic colleagues to dedicate more time to challenging “[self-evident truths](#)”. These were the dominant assumptions, core beliefs and established ways of viewing a specific challenge or dilemma. “The fact that something is widely believed,” Ostrom wrote in a 2000 article, “does not make it correct.”

And yet challenging self-evident truths is, of course, far easier to advocate than to do. The conservatism of [peer-review processes](#) is widely recognised and can make it incredibly difficult to publish research that genuinely seeks to challenge convention. This is not a new problem.

A quarter of a century ago, for example, the work of Joshua Gans and George Shepherd on “[how the mighty are fallen](#)” explored the link between intellectual ambition and journal rejection. More recently, the [launch](#) of the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* reflects increasing concern about the narrowness of academic thinking in the fractious current political culture.

But what has generally received far less attention is how the existence of locked-in ways of thinking – reinforced through journal publication processes – affects the ability of different disciplines to play a leading role in terms of impact, relevance and social value.

Take, for example, the emergence of a strand of scholarship on what's called [positive public administration](#). This approach resonates with Ostrom's arguments in the sense that it exposes a dominant emphasis – or “self-evident truth” – within the fields of public administration and political science that tends to focus upon examples of institutional failure.

This is reflected in the existence of a [burgeoning literature](#) on government crises, fiascos and scandals, which in itself fuels a well-known societal “negativity bias”.

In this context, the proponents of positive public administration have adopted a decidedly deviant position: instead of focusing on failure, they “[walk on the bright side](#)”, training the analytical spotlight on public projects and policies that have achieved their ambitions – or even surpassed the wildest expectations.

While some successes are highly visible and generally applauded – the furlough schemes that paid wages during the Covid restrictions, for instance, or the roll-out of the UK's vaccination programme – most remain overlooked. The way that regulatory agencies, for example, strive to ensure that food is safe, drugs are controlled and planes are fit for flight is generally taken for granted rather than actively applauded, let alone studied.

The argument of positive public administration is that the analysis of success is at least as important as a perpetual focus on failure. But it is a difficult argument to make.

The issue is not just that peer-review processes are inherently conservative; it is far deeper and more normative than that. The political pinch point within academe is that most scholars are trained towards an emphasis on caution and criticality. This is especially true in the social sciences, where officialdom, bureaucracy and the state are objects of suspicion, whose deeds are to be monitored and evaluated with scepticism.

This attitude is, of course, historically rooted and intellectually valid, but when it becomes a *sine qua non* of researching politics and government, it is an intellectual prison. Moreover, it is the inmates of this prison who do most of the reviewing for journals. The positive public administration scholar's suggestion that some policies may have been a success is to risk the wrath of this culture, steeped in “dilemmas”, “games”, “blunders”, “pathologies” and “crises”.

As early escapees from the prison of negativity, we have faced this treatment. Our initial attempts to promote positive public administration were rejected time and again by a succession of leading journals. Reviewers seemed unable or unwilling to accept a fundamental challenge, editors reluctant to facilitate deep challenge.

But positive public administration is nothing if not – well – *positive*. Our intergenerational group of scholars, from across the world, took to [self-publishing online](#). Digital debate and discussion flourished immediately. All of a sudden, mostly new or non-mainstream journals came out of the woodwork to invite us to publish with them. Within weeks, [a fresh manifesto](#) for positive public administration was published.

The default criticality of scholars should never be lost or dulled. The new funding regimes, which increasingly require academics to demonstrate their non-academic impact, should not lead to what one of us has previously called a [tyranny of relevance](#), in which

academics [trade](#) an element of their independence for the chance to join generously funded and potentially high-impact projects.

But that is not an argument for eschewing the [analysis of success](#). Walking on the bright side has nothing to do with co-option, selling out or sidelining criticality. It simply seeks to explore what works, *alongside* what has failed. This is the only way to provide a sophisticated and balanced account of how society might better address the complex challenges on the horizon.

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