

THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY: ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN THE AGE OF CORPORATE SCIENCE

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Abstract

Knowledge society lies on the ruins of national culture that thought people to function in a single universal form of science. This type of society is tightly related to a post-national multicultural world that nourishes the erosion of classical (Kantian and Humboldtian) cultural and scientific foundations of the university. We are now witnessing its transformation into a "multiversity" dominated by the competitive international academic market for students and scholars and "commodified" knowledge. The fiscal crisis of publicly financed universities forced them to constantly pursue other forms of income, the industry being the most obvious solution. In the place of universities of reason and culture the drastic decrease of public funding generated the commercialization of the universities. This is because there is an "asymmetric convergence": while universities are adopting corporate values and principles the industry itself is not influenced by the academic values and norms. The pursuit of knowledge for mere intellectual curiosity and also the conception of the knowledge as a public good have been abandoned in favor of applied research serving corporate interests. The resulting academic capitalism is far from being the best solution to budget cuts and this study is trying to highlight some of advantages but also the most important shortcomings of this present trend in our universities.

Keywords: *knowledge society, commodified knowledge, academic capitalism, corporate interests, research limitations*

Introduction

During the last decade one of the most heated debates regarding academic freedom took place in USA. It was caused by an extremely controversial agreement signed between two important institutions: a famous land-grant university and the biggest pharmaceutical and biotechnological corporation. The fierce debate remained known as the Berkeley-Novartis Controversy. I chose this very interesting chapter in the industry-university relation as a starting point of my research as a result of a peculiar situation regarding the way this controversy was reflected in the mainstream press. When theorists made an inquiry on the most debated themes in mainstream journals, the general ethics issues came in the fourth place after corporate control, general research and economic concerns themes. It is not my intention to reshape the current interpretations of this particular event but to prove that this controversy is also important on a different level. I consider that the Berkeley-Novartis Agreement epitomizes a very controversial relation between corporations and universities and I think this should be the starting point for further analyzing the ethical challenges the university has to address in the present knowledge society. The long debated Berkeley-Novartis Controversy is only a result of a much deeper crisis threatening the academic world. The long praised academic Ivory Tower is currently under attack from many directions. It is my intention to bring forward some of its enemies by highlighting some of the dramatic transformations taking place in university of the knowledge society.

In the first section of my paper I shall present some of the key moments in the transformation of the university. The university has been for centuries the sole producer of knowledge and this is only one of the many reasons it was built as an intellectual Ivory Tower now under siege. Nowadays

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there are numerous knowledge producers and knowledge users and the knowledge society is also a society of huge corporation deeply connected to the neoliberal political agenda. This is why I think it is very important to put the university into a historical and political context in order to see whether the university lies in ruins, as Readings¹ would say or whether it can serve a more important role in the global context by linking the knowledge to its users as Delanty² would argue.

The second section of my paper I shall analyze some of the most important theories regarding the penetration of the managerial ethos in the academic space. The growing importance of the corporations as major sources of income for universities generated different theories trying to describe the complex relation between industry and university.

Finally in the third section of my paper I shall take a closer look to the Berkeley-Novartis Controversy in order to pinpoint the important ethical implications of the so-called academic capitalism dominating the university in the knowledge society. Although it is a recent development in Romanian academic world, academic capitalism is been largely promoted in the past decade through policies and practices designed to build a closer relationship with the economy in the context of deregulation and fierce competitiveness. This is why I think that before embracing this type of perspective a closer analysis of its most important implications is in order.

1. The historical evolution of the university

In an extremely well documented work Gerard Delanty brings forward some of the most important moments in the transformation of the university. I shall follow in this section some of the directions he is analyzing. During medieval times the university was closely related to the idea of a universal truth offered by the Christian theology. It was an austere place resembling the literary myth of Castalia where an order of intellectuals lived for the discovery of the ultimate Truth. Since this was such an abstract quest anyone could participate in it and the result was the scholars all over the world gathered in the university offering it a cosmopolitan character. The medieval institutions were even more cosmopolitan than those functioning today. The Bologna's ten thousand students came from all over Europe. But this was not the only aspect giving them a privileged position in the medieval academic world. We may ask ourselves what was so interesting about our Christian University. During medieval times important universities flourished outside the Christian world. Twenty-five thousand students learned in the Muslim university of Timbuktu, for example. It was the incredible dynamics of the European university that help it develop in a way that Hindu, Muslim or Chinese universities were not able to since they were imprisoned by a very strict curricula. The continuous specialization in the curricula of Christian universities helped them make such important progress. During those times Latin was the official language of the university. The lack of technological means of communication made this process very difficult. Knowledge was the privilege of a very few scholars able to learn the languages of Antiquity in order to have access to its manuscripts. The relation with the public was quasi inexistent due to the cultural, economic and political characteristics of medieval society. Thus, knowledge was the delight of some privileged individuals able to learn the dead languages of Antiquity. This privileged stance of medieval scholars was praised or criticized by different philosophers analyzing knowledge and its evolution. The literary myth of Castalia can be contrasted to the cynical perspective offered by *Il Nome della Rosa*. Auguste Comte is underling the fact that it was this peculiar social situation that made knowledge metaphysical (separated form society). In other words, knowledge was not metaphysical by itself: the social context made it so. This is a recurrent theme in the philosophy of science and this is not the place to analyze it any further. The rise of modern university is closely related to the struggle of institutionalizing knowledge. The university was trying to escape de dominance of the Church and

¹ Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins*, Harvard University Press, 1996

² Gerard Delanty, *Challenging Knowledge. The University in the Knowledge Society*, Open University Press, 2001.

find refuge under the wing of the absolutist state. Due to its cosmopolitan nature the university managed to escape the absolute political control and this is why theorists venture to say that it was the unique milieu where “culture was never fully dominated by power”.³ The relative autonomy of the university was also a result of a particular social and political context: while the authority of the Church was declining the modern state was not fully established. In between those two powerful institutions, the university was able to gain some academic freedom. The university was often developed as an autonomous association of scholars able to grant important privileges to its members. This is why the common understanding of the university was that of a “republic of letters” or a “republic of science” where knowledge was considered an end in itself. Using the capitalist terms, Delanty is describing this situation as one where “knowledge became a site to be inhabited by a knowledge producing and consuming elite. Unlike today, those who produced knowledge were also the chief consumers of knowledge.”

The Enlightenment was the period where the historical alliance of the university with the state was largely established and accepted. The academic institutions were central to the consolidation of the national state. The very essence of the Enlightenment was the belief that knowledge has an emancipatory power. The modern state was built up on the firm ground offered by the rationalistic and technocratic values of the Enlightenment. The belief in the emancipatory power of knowledge made it possible for the masses to have access to formal education. It was the time where the school became financed by the state and where everyone was granted access to some form of education. Unfortunately this came with the cost of destroying the old medieval universities. Not surprisingly, this side effect was most visible at the heart of the Enlightenment movement, that is, in France. This was the country with the most collateral damages as a result of Napoleon’s project of creating *les grandes ecoles* responsible for doing most part of the research, the teaching activity being main task of the universities.

Another key moment in the development of the university was the rise of positivism. It was for the first time in the history of the university where the culture of experts was opposed to the culture of intellectuals. More precisely with the rise of positivism came the exile of the intellectuals populating the salons and not the university that was conquered by experts and scientists. Despite the conflict between scientist and intellectuals they all shared the monastic belief that knowledge is autonomous and that they are the producers and owners of knowledge. This situation was not common to all the European states. In Germany, the Enlightenment had a slightly different understanding. The French version of the Enlightenment considered knowledge able to help cultivate the people and to substantially contribute to the progress of the society. In Germany the emphasis was on the culture as the main element responsible for the self-construction. German university also benefit from the presence of one of the most important philosophers of all time, Immanuel Kant. In 1778 he published the famous plea to the Prussian king *The Conflict of Faculties*. Those were glorious days for philosophers, who, benefiting from the presence of such a powerful personality found themselves in a privileged position, that of servants of reason and truth. It was perhaps a unique moment when the apparent lack of immediate utility of philosophy was transformed in such a huge advantage. Not only philosophy was to be tolerated although it did not serve an immediate political or social goal, but it had to be accepted as the most important of the faculties exactly for its fully commitment to superior values such as reason and truth. The philosophers were not the only ones to take advantage of this perspective. It was the starting point for the justification of the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself.

The case of England was slightly different since Oxbridge was designed to educate clerics and gentlemen rather than experts and intellectuals. The conservative attitude of England’s most famous universities reflected in an anti-industrial values. This is why they adapted later to modernity and its values.

³ Gerard Delanty, *Challenging Knowledge. The University in the Knowledge Society*, Open University Press, 2001.

The most influential intellectual whose work and ideas contributed decisively to the creation of the first modern university was Wilhelm von Humboldt. He was one of the most important supporters of the academic freedom. Instead on being a place where civil servants trained, the university has to be the institution having the important spiritual role of cultivating the entire nation. Humboldt defended the university against the bourgeois utilitarian conception of knowledge so largely accepted in present times. He considered that the university should take the huge responsibility of offering spiritual guidance, therefore taking the place of the Church. Those were the glory days for those cherishing the utopian perspective of the university as a "Republic of Letters". This perspective had the peculiar side effect of allowing theology to come back into the university as an important field of knowledge. The true enemy of the "Republic of Letter" was not the Church, but the utilitarians. The University College London was founded by important utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham and they denied the right of theology to consider itself a cognitive science. The struggle to maintain the university as the institution fully committed to the idea of searching knowledge as an end in itself was not an easy task. There were important intellectual figures to maintain the idea that knowledge has to be useful for the society. Herbert Spencer for example was very prompt to adopt a perspective favoring science and socially useful knowledge and not humanities.

This type of civic responsibility was partly cherished by American pragmatists such as Peirce, James and Dewey but their commitment was mostly directed towards the community. Thus American academic institutions found themselves closer to their cities and their region than to the state or the empire. They mostly provided useful knowledge for those in need of vocational training. Their commitment locally directed is perhaps the main reason for their surviving in the initial form in the Globalization era. Since they were never closely related to the nation state and they never assumed the responsibility of spiritually guiding the nation and pursue knowledge as an end in itself they were able to survive de decline of the national state.

Many cultural wars occurring in modern times influenced the faith of the university. The numerous attempts to reconcile all knowledge with the Christian doctrine, for example, represents yet another battle shaping the form of today's academic world. We can still sense the echoes of those heated debates. The Natural Theology is far from its glory days, but there are still Protestant Colleges in the USA where teaching the evolution theory is forbidden by their founding members.

The history of the university represents a fascinating subject interesting by itself. I only used it to place the debate about the academic capitalism in a historical context. The medieval and modern legacy left us with an unsolved conflict between the cultural-liberal perspective and the modern perspective on the role of higher education. The first one stresses the role of humanities and of pursuing knowledge as an end in itself while the former is committed to the scientific progress and the usefulness of knowledge.

The debate between liberal and modern perspectives on the university did not forbid the state to be for a very long period of time the sole financial provider of academic institutions. Even after the world wars the state was greatly supporting universities and was the main source of income for research programs. Although there were a lot of criticisms related to the fact that most research programs were related to the army and the Cold War the universities received great financial support from their government. This was, along with the technological progress, one of the key factors leading to the unprecedented development of the university. This development meant the appearance of a large number of new academic institutions and the transformation of the university form an elitist site to a mass form of education. As we all know higher quantity almost always means lower quality and this is the main reason this recent development of the university is not always accepted as the best direction to follow.

The seven decade of the last century bought along with important students protests major changes in the way universities are financed. The 1968 revolt was the moment where it became clear that the university was no longer an ally of the national state. Although it received most of its funds from the government the university was no longer offering spiritual guidance to the nation. On the

contrary, it became a site of intellectual revolt were the very foundation of the modern state were questioned. The financial problems of the eighties reflected in an important decrease in federal funds. Consequently the old and the newly created universities found themselves functioning on their own in a very competitive environment. The end of the Cold War was the second important factor determining the state to retreat its financial support. The development of huge corporations able to invest important amounts of money into research and the university's search for funds were the elements contributing to the emergence of academic capitalism. One of the first books written on the subject offers the following definition: "institutional and professorial market or market-like efforts to secure external moneys"⁴ This is one of the two most important enemies of the academic Ivory Tower. The other one is cultural relativism. The capitalist approach to knowledge transforms it into useful information that can be transformed in intellectual property. This perspective that leads to the instrumentation of knowledge finds a very powerful ally in the postmodernist cultural relativism. In other words, the cultural relativist assumption is that there is no such thing as the ultimate truth. Everything is culturally determined and there are many competing truths equally legitimate. The feminist movement and the minority struggles contributed to the erosion of the idea of a unifying culture supporting the national state. In the absence of an ultimate truth to be pursued for its own sake the knowledge as an end in itself cannot exist anymore. This way only the useful knowledge should be taken into consideration. This assumption has many implications: the final victory of the modern perspective of the university with its emphasis on science but also the victory of applied research over fundamental research. Some of those implications are analyzed by numerous theorists and I shall present the most important perspective in the following section of my paper.

2. Theories of universities in knowledge society

Since knowledge should not be pursued as a mere intellectual curiosity but serve a superior goal, that is the social progress no advantages could be granted to researchers and professors. They have to be socially responsible. This is translated into the accountability of their work. Nobody seems to be willing to offer money for a research project that has no immediate and measurable results. This is why universities have to justify every penny they receive and this is paving the way for the development of the so-called "audit society". The managerial ethos is penetrating academic space and values such as efficiency, profit and low production costs are undermining the academic ideal of a "Republic of Letters" or a "Republic of Science" governed solely by the rules of Reason. Several theories have been developed in order to explain this situation. They include private versus public interest science (Krimsky, 2003), academic capitalism (Slaughter, Leslie, 1997), the triple helix (Etzkowitz, Leydersdorff, 1997), public private isomorphism, (Hackett, 1990), asymmetrical convergence (Kleinman, Vallas, 2001).

The public-private interest theory is underling a very important aspect regarding the research conducted in universities. Nowadays science requires a huge amount of technological tools. Nobody can conduct an important research project without being granted access to the sophisticated laboratories and the state of the art technological tools. Since the state is no longer the sole provider of those research instruments universities turn to private investors. The raising problem is that those private investors will not be interested in making the results of the scientific research available to the public. This can have extremely dangerous consequences if we think at the microbiology research. In a very pessimistic perspective we shall all be eating deadly "franken-foods" since the results of the research made in this field would not be available for the public. The big corporations are only interested in transforming the knowledge into intellectual property by patenting the scientific discoveries and selling those patents. The capitalist approach is focusing only to one aspect of accountability, that is explaining why and how money is being spent. In the audit society the

⁴ Sheila Slaughter, Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State and Higher Education*, John Hopkins University Press, 2004.

universities are accountable, but only for the money they use, not for the public they should inform. They are fiscally but not socially accountable and this way it is not at all clear whether their research is in fact socially useful or not.

The academic capitalism theory was developed by Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades. They define academic capitalism as the pursuit of profit using the well-known market means. Thus universities compete not only for the *best* students but for *enough* students allowing them to secure their profit from tuitions. Also universities are competing for research grants allowing them to gain profit from the results of scientific discoveries.

During modern times the university found itself in the middle of two other important powers: the Church and the national state. The triple helix theory is emphasizing the fact that nowadays universities are found themselves again at the intersection of two important powers: the government and the industry. The federal funds often came with political strings attached: most part of the research conducted after World War II was related to military objectives. The corporate funds have their own strings attached: there is no possibility for the university to do research questioning the corporate interests on its own money. The research agenda is no longer freely established.

The isomorphism theory and asymmetrical convergence theory are both underlying the fact that universities and industry institutions are becoming more alike since the penetration of managerial ethos in the academe. The asymmetrical convergence theory is trying to show that there is an asymmetrical relation between industry and university since the university is more likely to be influenced by the industry by accepting its norms, values and procedures. Efficiency, low production costs, managerial hierarchy, audits are only a few of the industry's values adopted by contemporary universities.

What I shall try to do in this paper is not a comparative analysis of those theories. My intention is draw a list of the most important moral issues generated by those current developments in contemporary university.

3. Berkeley-Novartis Controversy

This very interesting episode in the history of contemporary university marks the beginning of the serious debate on the social accountability of the university. To the present day, universities were only to account for spending government or corporate money. They had to produce commodified knowledge to the profit of the state or the corporation. This was about to change when one of America's biggest land-grant university – Berkeley – signed a research agreement with the largest pharmaceutical company Novartis. The University of California was a "land-grant university". That is, the 1862 Morrill Act established that every state would preserve at least 40 acre of land for a university that would teach and disseminate information to the laboring masses. The land grant university served two traditions that theorists call the progressive and the populist traditions⁵. The progressive trend was represented by wealthy bankers and land owners who tried to improve the production mode. The populist trend was represented by left or right wing politicians or intellectuals trying to defend "the little guy" form major corporation interests. Those two traditions functioned together until the infamous agreement was signed. The university of California was largely perceived as representing mostly the populist tradition trying to develop research projects that would take into consideration the influence of major changes in agriculture would affect the farmers, for example.

The chronology of events that took place at Berkeley show us how a team of researchers at the Plant and Microbial Biology Department tried to find alternative research funds. First they tried to make the private corporation give them money with no strings attached: the university would have complete freedom in choosing the research agenda, the results of scientific research were to be made public, the faculty shall be rewarded according to the criteria established by the university. Of course,

⁵ Dawn Coppin, Jason Konefal, Bradley T. Shaw, Toby Ten Eyck, Laurence Busch, *Universities in the Age of Corporate Science*, Temple University Press, 2007.

none of the corporation was interested in signing such a contract. Several years later the demands regarding academic freedom and autonomy were dropped and the board of professors settled for only four criteria to be met by any corporation willing to invest in research. Those criteria included the alliance with only one industrial partner, use traditional competitive means in order to encourage bidding among the willing corporations. The fact that a whole department was involved in a contract with the higher bidder was often called, especially by those opposing this type of agreement, "the auctioning of the department". Thus in 1997 a committee of four was established. The same year Plant and Microbial Biology Department contacted nine companies insisting that a large number of faculty members could be interested in an alliance with a single industrial partner. From the six companies responding to the offer the committee selected Novartis in 1998. A first draft of the agreement was ready the same year. On August 1998 the Academic Senate was contacted about this contract. Several months later a non-profit organization, Students for Responsible Research presented the Academic Senate a petition with 400 signatures asking for the delay of the signing of the agreement. On November 1998 the agreement was signed despite the student's efforts to delay it. During the following years there attempts have been made to externally evaluate the agreement. In November 2003 the contract expired.

The most controversial aspect surrounding this agreement was the interesting tenure case of Ignacio Castaneda. In 1997 Castaneda was an untenured member of PMB. He was also a critic of the agreement. In 2001 he published along with David Quist, a graduate student, an article that received more attention than most scientific articles often do. He was stressing the fact that in Mexico the maize landraces contained transgenic DNA constructs and that those were unstable. A heated debate started in the academic community. The controversy was fueled by the findings of the newspaper *The Guardian* that provided evidence for the debate on Castaneda's article being initiated by some fictitious scientist traced back to a public relation firm owned by the biotechnological corporation Monsanto. The same year the intensely debated article was published began the evaluation of granting tenure to Castaneda. The first committee voted overwhelmingly for granting tenure (32 to 1). The dean forwarded this case to an ad-hoc external committee for further review. At this point a very unusual decision was made by the chair of the ad-hoc committee asked that the members of this board had nothing to do with the Berkeley Novartis agreement. The ad-hoc committee recommended tenure. The case was sent back to the committee for further review. The chief of that committee resigned. Then Castaneda's case was sent to the Academic Senate Committee where Jasper Rine was a member on the Advisory Board of B-N agreement. This Committee denied tenure to Castaneda in 2003 who began a legal action against the university. In 2005, after heated debates and important support of faculty members (more than three hundred faculty members signed a petition) Castaneda was finally granted tenure.

4. The ethical issues generated by the entrepreneurial perspective of universities

After setting the historical context and presenting one of the most controversial corporation-university agreement we are able to detect the most important ethical issues deriving from the penetration of the managerial ethos into the academe.

a. The first ethical problem relates to academic freedom. A cherished value for several centuries, academic freedom means that university professors and researchers should be free to decide what are the most interesting research themes and establish the curricula according to their wishes. This is maybe only an ideal that was never fully realized. Every historical period had its examples of occasions where this imperative was not applied. It is my intention to show who overrides today this ethical principle. The academic capitalism has its own flaws in terms of accepting academic freedoms. Embracing efficiency as its main value the entrepreneurial university is not interesting in critical thinking or on debates since it has to take decisions fast. The Academic Senate is a time and money consuming in terms of decision making. Thus, the hierarchy present in corporations tends to replace the democratic method of making decisions in the entrepreneurial

university. Since the profit is the only legitimate goal those in charge of university's destiny resemble more to the managers than to the professors.

b. Closely related to the first problem is the way work is being evaluated in the university. Since it is very difficult to deal with "tenured radical" the whole process of granting tenure is designed to be very complex. More than fifty percent of faculty members hired in major universities are not tenured. This is partly because the tenured radical has a great power: he is well trained, possessing important knowledge, having important critical thinking skills and strong beliefs. In other words he is the nightmare of any manager seeking efficiency: that is the rapid implementation of his decisions by the obedient subordinates. This is probably why tenured was abandoned in some countries such as England. The faculty members have to be efficient. Thus, the industry of producing articles was born. Everybody is engaged in a desperate quest for more and more published articles. This creates an inflation of articles.

c. The third ethical challenge regards the way research is conducted in contemporary university. The Berkeley-Novartis controversy showed us how difficult someone opposing corporate control was granted tenure. It is also important from other points of view. First of all setting the research agenda should be entirely the task of the university. But how can some scientist develop a research project opposing the corporation funding the department objectives? Today's research implies access to extremely sophisticated technological instruments and it is by no means the work of the solitary scientist. The Berkeley Novartis agreement was a dangerous and unprecedented step since a whole department found itself at the mercy of a unique huge industrial partner with hundreds millions of dollars at its disposal. Given those circumstances, how can anyone develop research projects affecting the financial interests of the corporation?

d. The fourth ethical dilemma is also related to scientific research. From another perspective, the commodified knowledge is the result of transforming the scientific discoveries into intellectual property afterwards sold by the industrial investor. But what if the scientific discoveries were to affect the public? Is the university only accountable for the way it spends corporate money or is it also accountable for the way its research affects the public? The common assumption of the "absolute relativism" is that there is no ultimate truth but only partial truths and that there is no such thing as fundamental research. The relativism and instrumentalism are combining giving birth to the situation where those partial truths are transformed into the intellectual property. The objective of making knowledge useful to society can no longer be met since, in the era of academic capitalism, the university is only accountable for the money it spends. There is simply no way of determining whether the scientific research is useful or not since for the sole reason that it is not available for the public. The problem is even more complex when it comes to universities still receiving government funds. If the university is using also government money and is then transforming the scientific findings into the intellectual property of the corporation the academic institution find itself in the position where it is using government funds to transform public knowledge into intellectual property.

e. The third moral challenge regards the "conflict of faculties". One of the main reasons the university loses its importance is the transformation of the national society into the knowledge society. The technological progress and the globalization process based of the generalization of financial capitalism made it possible for knowledge to be incorporated in every aspect of our society. Since the decline of the national state the university is no longer the unique provider of knowledge. But this is not the only major transformation: there are also numerous knowledge consumers. In this context the battle between the liberal and the modern perspective on university is finally decided. "The Republic of Letters" is finally defeated by "the Republic of Science". In the knowledge society is easier to survive if you are a scientist. Even if you have to make important compromises you can still have a successful career as a scientist. This is not the case of those working in the humanities. Philosophy or history are both tolerated in the academic institution seeking profit at all costs.

Conclusion

Knowledge has no value in itself in the knowledge society. There are theorists trying to prove that there is still room for the university role in this type of society. Gerard Delanty stresses that the major contribution of contemporary university is to diminish the growing gap between knowledge producers and knowledge users. I think that this is too optimistic. What we are experiencing in terms of defining the university status is a mixture of postmodern cultural relativism, utilitarianism and positivism. Given these circumstances we, as intellectuals working in humanities, are risking to be facing the same abominable imperative of a not so long ago abolished social order. That is: intellectuals are not productive. The scientific findings of a philosopher or a classical language professor cannot be transformed into the intellectual property of any corporation. It has no potential consumers since the interest in those fields is constantly dropping. The knowledge we are offering cannot be sold to anyone so why bother to produce it?

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