

What we need is more academic freedom: A response to Timming.

In his [recent article](#), Prof. Timming argued that there are two types of academics when it comes to publication practices: the realists and the idealists. He rightfully admitted where he stands in this debate (spoiler; he is a realist) and provided valid justifications about why he believes that publication feels like a game. He picked a very provocative title that claims, “Everyone Plays the Academic Publishing Game, Even Those Who Claim They Don’t.” In this piece, I will try to list some of the reasons why this is indeed true, and provide some idealist perspectives, even though I also admit that I am a converted realist, while I still believe that things could be significantly better.

As Prof. Timming has also indicated that there is, indeed, a problem when it comes to measuring the quality in research. As there is a problem to measure the passion of a researcher. As there is a problem to measure some things that cannot be truly measured. While rankings, ratings, and other mechanisms can help solve the problem, it may also add fuel to the fire. As frequently cited as Goodhart’s law, when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.

One of the main reasons why everyone plays the academic publishing game, even those who claim they don’t, is a by-product of the current system. Needless to say that publications, especially the number of high-impact journal publications are almost the only significant determinant of finding an academic job. It is not uncommon to get CVs of recent PhD graduates with dozens of top journal publications. Early career researchers are not only expected to be productive but also globally competitive before their careers start. This creates a significant problem that growing publication expectations lead to barriers and discrimination for researchers who could blossom at later stages at their careers. If university administrators think that life has

stochastic, predictable patterns, we will keep reading studies “that are technically and econometrically very impressive, but most add almost no new value to what we already know” as Prof. Timming complained about. Unfortunately, publishing has become a game with its learned rules and practices and has no room for creativity and literary aesthetics, rather than a practice whose sole purpose used to be to communicate research findings.

As Prof. Timming also suggested, rankings, ratings, and other metrics have absolute flaws. This is undeniable. However, we should not forget the influence of the commercialization of higher education. This is one of the major factors why there is a need for rank-orderable systems as they powerfully shape student choices. As funding at universities largely depends on tuition fees, it is hard for universities not to promote the broken publication game, as more publication means more funding, whereas more bad research has no direct cost at least in the short run other than to the research community and society.

Researchers at universities, especially at competitive ones, are also required (sometimes imposed) to publish their research in a limited set of journals, and more than often their careers depend on this. This pressure adds more problems, and intensely endangers academic freedom. As a result, top journal publications have become the single performance norm and indicator for almost everyone in academia. Other academic activities such as teaching, publications in languages other than English, disseminating knowledge and many others which were traditionally taken as signs of intellectual contribution, they all are considered as inferior and become a burden for researchers.

As a researcher, I also feel the responsibility to speak up about some of the hits that our academic freedom gets. The real problem we have is more linked to the erosion of academic freedoms, so we constantly need debates in alternative platforms from a critical lens, which goes

beyond research. And probably, although he admits that he used to be an idealist some years ago, I still believe that Prof. Timming still is an idealist, as running an unusual platform like Dire-Ed demonstrates that he has much more to offer than communicating in echo chambers of researchers.

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