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# Why Publish?

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*This essay explores the accelerating trends of academic publishing, and the increasing number of academic journals, in terms of the trade-offs and paradoxes they present to academics. As more gets published, less gets read. Expectations for 'productivity' (defined as more publications) continue to rise. Proxy measures of quality, like impact factors, take on greater significance. This essay explores the consequences for authors, on the one hand, and journal editors, on the other hand, of coping with this regime; and asks whether there is any realistic alternative aside from continuing on the treadmill of publishing more and more.*

## INTRODUCTION: A FEW FACTS

In 'How To Improve Your Impact Factor: Questioning the Quantification of Academic quality', Paul Smeyers and I have questioned the growing reliance on journal impact factors (JIFs) as a basis for academic evaluation (Smeyers and Burbules, 2011). It turns out that even for journals with very high impact factors many papers are cited little if at all:

> The majority of papers are not cited many times in any particular year, and so the JIF is strongly influenced by a small percentage of published papers. … Interestingly, our 2005 JIF depends more on a few highly cited papers than our higher 2006 JIF, which is much more influenced by papers cited a moderate number of times. This greater spread is healthier for the journal. However, in both cases a high proportion of papers are not cited at all (Ogden and Bartley, 2008).

For the top science journal *Nature*, 90 percent of its impact factor was based on less than a quarter of its publications.[1]

Indeed, we know that the average academic paper is read only ten times. But that's an average. In the humanities more than 80 percent of published papers are never cited; and even when they are cited, they aren't read (Biswas and Kirchherr, 2015).

> Half of all published papers are read by no one aside from the authors, reviewers, and editors (Eveleth, 2014).[2]


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And yet we also see a rapid growth in the number of journals worldwide, putting even more published work into circulation (Altbach and de Wit, 2018).

## THE DIAGNOSIS

Putting these pieces together, we need to ask: Why is so much being published? Several factors seem to be reinforcing each other. (1) One is the takeover of academic journals by a handful of large global commercial publishers, subsidised by academic libraries who are compelled to maintain their journal collection, regardless of costs. Keeping up those markets means maintaining a steady supply of new published content. (2) Another factor is an academic evaluation system for faculty based largely on published journal output, in which quantity is easier to measure than quality—or in which proxies for quality, like impact factors, substitute quantified metrics for the actual evaluation of content. (3) A third factor is the identity and motivations of academics themselves who, apart from external reward systems, regard writing and publishing to put their ideas into circulation as an indispensable part of their scholarly role. Writing is essential to their sense of personal, intellectual and professional development—so much so that many faculty continue to write and publish long after they have retired and are no longer evaluated, or rewarded, based on research productivity. (4) New technologies for writing have accelerated the pace and volume of publication. Things are faster to produce; easier to revise and edit; simpler to document with citations and footnotes; quicker through the process of transmission among authors, journals and referees; and easier to turn into publishable layout. E-texts also encourage copying and reusing text chunks in different publications, revising them for each new purpose rather than writing all new material each time from scratch. In some fields, a highly standardised format for journal articles allows researchers to publish dozens of papers a year.

The result is that too much gets written and published, too little gets read or cited, and even a devoted scholar will find it impossible to keep up with everything produced and published within his or her field. Many skim abstracts as a guide to which papers they will actually bother to read, or cite papers based only on the abstract. *Remember: half of all published papers are never read at all*.

Then there is the enormous labour of editors and referees whose time and effort are essential to the maintenance of journal quality. There are many benefits of these efforts, completely apart from whether the eventually published work is ever read—but clearly people would be less willing to do all this work if they thought it were for naught.

So, why do we keep writing and publishing so much? Why do those of us who serve as editors work so hard to produce journal issues in which the majority of published articles will be read or cited little if at all? Why do we persist with academic reward systems based on criteria of merit that may be in many cases spurious—and which drive behaviours that are to a large degree counterproductive? All of us know colleagues for whom the best advice would be: WRITE LESS.

## THE CONSEQUENCES, WRIT LARGE

In the area of faculty assessment, more publications mean even less time to review them for content; the use of quantified metrics becomes even more necessary, however imperfect we acknowledge them to be. (As one of my administrators once told me, 'They are better than nothing'. That's debatable.) But the increased numbers also create an inflationary effect: as the norms and expectations get ratcheted upward, there is more pressure to produce even more. This is not a vicious circle, but a vicious spiral, pressing ever upwards. One response is to game the system of metrics: publishing multiple variations of the same work, choosing publication outlets strategically, and playing tricks designed to maximise 'impact factors'—a tacit conspiracy in which authors and journal editors have mutual self-interests (Burbules, 2015; Smeyers and Burbules, 2011).

Because in some countries impact factors are a factor in grant competition, the chase after metrics is not just a matter of pride or status—it can have an actual cash value. Add to this the pressure to get grants, and in some cases academic positions that depend on, and are paid for by, the candidate's grant acquisitions. The means become the ends.

The result is a perfect application of 'Campbell's Law': 'The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor'. The more high-stakes impact factors or other metrics are for reviewing and rewarding scholarly work … the more meaningless they become.

For individual scholars, this can become the kind of treadmill where one has to go faster and faster to stay in one place. Graduate school programmes, hiring policies, and (where applicable) tenure reviews are coming to reflect these upward pressures:

> The likely secondary and tertiary effects of this trend are alarming. Graduate programs will need to favor applicants who show promise of being able to publish after only a few years of study, exacerbating the trend away from attracting undergraduates who have majored in other fields, especially in the humanities. Graduate students will spend time on navigating the publication maze instead of experimenting with a variety of sub-disciplines. Philosophers will become narrower and narrower—well qualified, perhaps, to run the narrowed publication maze but unequipped to open up new frontiers in the subject (Velleman, 2017).

For journal editors and referees, as already noted, this produces its own kind of productivity pressures. Journals are more openly commercial endeavours now; many journals are increasing the number of issues produced each year; metrics of assessment like impact factors affect journals too; and these comparative rankings can produce their own kind of competition between journals—something that was rare in the past. Publishing more *and* maintaining standards of quality seem to be on a collision course. Editors are under a growing workload; referees, who are typically uncompensated,

have more and more submissions to review; or, more 'invited' articles are published through attenuated or minimal review, sometimes only on the editor's say-so:

> !The volume of submissions to journals has exploded. It is not uncommon for a journal to receive 500–600 submissions per year. The amount of attention that can be paid to each submission, the percentage of submissions that can be refereed, and the selectivity that editors can exercise in recruiting referees—all have declined proportionately (Velleman, 2017).

Alongside the growth of journal publications, commercial publishers are commissioning edited book collections, sometimes of voluminous size, which they assume libraries will be compelled to purchase (they are much too expensive to be sold to individuals). These contribute to even more need for editors, contributors, and a refereeing, editorial and revision process than can meet the time constraints of a strict production schedule. Fewer authors produce solo academic monographs, and the market for their sales—unless the authors have an established reputation—does not excite publishers.

These developments, in turn, affect the content of what and how people write. A productivity regime rewards quick turnaround, a disregard for style and carefully crafted language, generating multiple variations to squeeze more than one publication out of the same basic idea (e.g. for different audiences). In general, this rewards derivative work and what Kuhn calls 'normal science': 'The need for an author to make an immediate impression on over-burdened editors, and the greatly diminished probability of success, have discouraged risk-taking in research and encouraged the production of formulaic papers on safe topics' (Velleman, 2017).[3]

Pressures to publish have other effects as well: stress, insecurity, health problems and substance abuse issues. What should be a privileged life of the mind, to contemplate, to formulate new, original, and provocative ideas, to dwell in the enjoyment of expression and creative writing, to try to produce work of enduring value and impact (and not 'impact') is for many scholars a fading dream. None of this is entirely new; the frustrated, overworked, or highly distracted scholar is a classic stereotype because it names familiar experiences. But the pressures are increasing, and for many scholars the intrinsic joy of writing is being squeezed out of them.

While the ethos of publication is supposedly a pure meritocracy, and practices such as anonymous (never say 'blind') refereeing are meant to be a fair equaliser, recent studies show that 3 percent of all institutions account for over half of publications in the humanities, and the top 25 percent account for almost 90 percent (Piper and Wellmon, 2017). While this may be a reflection of the concentration of talent in those schools, the overall pattern certainly raises questions about the opportunities for scholars outside of those elite institutions to build their reputations on the basis of publishing. And it also casts doubt on assessment exercises such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) as a basis for comparing

and evaluating institutions of higher education. Here as in other ways the academic rich get richer.

## THE CONSEQUENCES, FOR AUTHORS

There are different ways to respond to this regime. One is to accept it as an inevitable series of changes over which we as authors have little control, and to play the game within those rules with as much integrity as possible. It is legitimate, one might say, to care about advancing a professional reputation, seeking status and influence, and advancing one's professional career. If these benefits require an understanding of what kinds of work get rewarded, what kinds of journals best represent one's work, and how to get one's work noticed and read within an ocean of publications, there are still better and worse ways of navigating that system, and it is not automatically incompatible with doing good, important work.

Having said that, I think the numbers that open this paper are extremely sobering. How much of what we do, whatever our intentions, contributes to an academic Gresham's Law (bad currency overcrowding and cheapening the marketplace)? Life is full of legitimate individual decisions which, taken in the aggregate, have damaging consequences. The publishing treadmill looks to be another case. Nor, as in the other kinds of aggregated cases one might imagine, would the decisions of any individual to write less diminish the overall system. So, one might say, a certain degree of humility and self-questioning is called for. Apart from what might be called professional considerations, why do we write? Do we need to focus more on those other reasons, and less on the ways in which others evaluate or measure the value of what we do? Here are some thoughts.

We write and publish as an expression of our identity as scholars. We would do so even if few people ever read us. We believe that our thoughts and insights are worthwhile, and we want them to gain circulation. We hope, of course, that people will read and appreciate what we have done, but as we are writing such a hope might play a very small role. We write because we have something we want to say.

I have taken to telling my students the following little enumeration: If you are going into this business you have to accept four things. First, most people won't read you. Second, most who do read you won't understand you (at least not in the way you want to be understood). Third, most people who do read you and do understand you will disagree with you. And fourth, most people who do disagree with you will disagree for reasons that you find unfair. If you can't accept these things, don't go into this line of work. If you need recognition and approval to confirm the value of what you do, don't go into this line of work. If you can't accept people criticising you, don't go into this line of work. As you reach the end of your career, if you are fortunate enough to have a long career, you will have a surprisingly short list of memories of people praising your work and grasping what you were trying to say in just the way you were trying to say it.

We also write as a way of working out our own ideas. The process of writing—and a good deal of its pleasure—is in seeing the transformation

of thoughts and ideas into words that we then read, as it were, back to ourselves, often seeing in these words a clarification of what we thought, or even sometimes a new idea that goes beyond what we were simply trying to put on paper. This suggests that part of the purpose of writing, even if it were never published or never read by anyone else, is our own intellectual productivity and growth. But, of course, we usually try to publish it too.

As scholars, we tend to regard the pursuit of knowledge and understanding as an intrinsic good, and to regard our contributions to that as part of a collective effort within our field to enlarge such knowledge and understanding. Sometimes this takes the model of building a wall, brick upon brick, in a cumulative, progressive process of knowledge growth. This relates to Kuhn's account of 'normal science', mentioned previously. Other kinds of scholarship have more to do with tearing down walls, or beginning the foundations of new walls—a closer approximation to what Kuhn calls 'revolutionary science'. Either way, however, the contributions of scholarship to the growth (or change) of knowledge and understanding within a community of inquiry depend on its actually being read and cited. And that is the question I am putting in doubt here.

At the same time, because most scholars are teachers as well as writers, I think an underexamined aspect of writing and publishing builds off our identity as pedagogues. We have something to teach, to explain, something that we have discovered or figured out that we think will be beneficial to others. The form is different, but the ethos is the same: the intellectual gift economy of giving away one's fruits—such as they might be—to a real (or imagined) audience.

In the fields of philosophy and history of education, we often write and publish with a hope of perhaps influencing matters of educational policy and practice. In my estimation, any such influence, especially in the policy arena, grows more out of a respect for and relationship with specific individuals than from an interest in the contributions of humanistic studies in education writ large. If our status overall depended on demonstrating any such influence on educational policy and practice, we would be, I must say, in trouble. Nor is journal publication, *per se*, the best route to take if such influence were a priority, as opposed to reports, commissioned projects, or lectures, workshops, and professional development sessions. It is more than a bit discouraging to see rigorous, well-argued cases against current educational policies and practices published by scholars in our fields, only to watch the same policies and practices continue anyway, as if none of that research had ever existed. It has to make you wonder.

Often we publish as an act of collegiality with others: collaborative work in which, sometimes, others have a bigger stake than we do; contributing chapters requested by friends and colleagues for their collections; reciprocating a favour when others have helped us. These interpersonal considerations become, perhaps, greater as one's career advances and one no longer needs to seek out publishing opportunities; and also as one's networks of connection and obligation grow. Of course we are happy to do it, if we agree to do it. But the motivation to do it does not usually grow primarily

out of an interest in advancing one's own line of work. Sometimes, in fact, just the contrary.

For those of us formed out of a particular critical orientation, sometimes the imperative to publish grows out of a felt need to challenge, correct or criticise other work that we think advances bad ideas or bad social and political agendas. Such work, of course, is potentially without limit, and few want a reputation built solely or even primarily on attacking others. But I think all of us have read something and thought, in one way or another: 'This must not stand!' Then it is a separate decision whether to try to write something about it—often as a bridge toward advancing one's own ideas on the subject.

All of these motivations, and others besides, can co-exist with each other. They do not necessarily stand alone, and even sometimes may pose conflicts with one another as we decide whether and what to write—and how to write it. I have explored some of these because I think it is a mistake to think that professional and careerist factors are always a driver. At the same time, it must be said that these motives, often admirable in themselves, nevertheless also contribute to the overproduction of published work. Hence the kind of humility I alluded to earlier. It is sad to consider that much of what we write, even when we think it is very good and very important, has a limited shelf life; that the numbers of people reading many of our pieces, *if any*, may seem hardly to justify the time and effort put into writing and publishing them. Or, I suppose, one could look at it as a stock portfolio: you never quite know which pieces are likely to 'take off,' and so you diversify in order to give yourself as many chances as possible. But this too contributes to overproduction.

Imagine a world in which you only published one article each year; a project that might take several years in gestation, countless drafts, extensive feedback from colleagues, and constant refinement before it sees the light of day. What kinds of different writing practices would this entail? How would it change your views about the originality and importance of the subject? How would you choose and prioritise your topics in order to highlight only the most important issues, for you, since your publication opportunities are limited?

## THE CONSEQUENCES, FOR JOURNAL EDITORS

I write this section with an awareness that many of my readers will be former and current journal editors, as I am myself. There is nothing I will refer to that I have not participated in myself; nor errors that I have not made myself.

Our partnerships with commercial publishers are a mixed blessing. It is virtually a necessity now, given the need for publication cost efficiencies, marketing and distribution (especially internationally), robust online presence, and very significant revenue gains that benefit our publications and our professional organisations. Many of us have worked with publishers who are principled, imaginative people who understand and value the scholarly enterprise. Nevertheless, the growth and centralisation of publication,

the constant creation of new journals, the temptations to publish more issues a year, or more articles per issue, in order to enhance revenues and expand reach, all contribute to the glut of publications. With libraries, reprint services, and professional societies becoming, in effect, captive audiences who must pay the going rate for journals—and this is a particular problem in scientific and medical fields, where journals are extremely expensive—the aggregated consequence of individually understandable decisions is to oversupply the marketplace and drive up costs. I do not believe in demonising publishing corporations or reducing their motivations to simple capitalist logic. But the scholarly/commercial partnership, I am suggesting, poses some real contradictions and unintended consequences for us.

If the edict for authors were to be to write less, the corresponding edict for us would be, publish less. But that creates problems of its own. A more exclusive, and more high stakes review and selection process, would engender more conflict and dissatisfaction. Rejected authors would have even more to lose, and would react accordingly. Given the research cited earlier, one might see an even greater concentration of publication space taken up by authors at high-status institutions. There would probably be even greater pressure to represent big-name, big-reputation authors, and there would be fewer opportunities to publish new, unconventional, and off-brand work just to give someone a chance or to represent work not currently of high value but which might portend something with growth potential. This could disproportionately disadvantage younger scholars and those working in less mainstream areas of study. But it would also make journals less likely to publish work that makes marginal contributions to standard, highly familiar lines of inquiry. Each article slot would really have to count.

Publishing less would have benefits for our referees, editors and production staff. The turnaround time for work might not be quite so harried. It would be a pleasure to produce an issue, or a volume, in which every piece truly shined, and it would be a pleasure to be able to give each and every piece sufficient attention to see that it truly shined.

But I am engaging here in a bit of fantasy fiction, unfortunately. We are not going back. We are not going to cut revenues. We are not going to press our publishing partners to reduce the number of publications, cut costs, or reduce the plethora of new journals like *The Journal of Hate Studies*. The explosive availability of online publishing opportunities, including open access and self-publishing, only exacerbates this problem.

The good news is that it has never been easier to get published, somewhere, in one way or another. That is wonderful and egalitarian and lets a thousand—ten thousand, a hundred thousand—flowers bloom. The bad news is that academic scholarship is not and should not be in the egalitarian business, because the more that gets published, the less gets read.

## A GLIMPSE INTO THE FUTURE

The pressure to publish, and the hope of being read, is producing a new set of strategies for using social media and other outlets to promote one's work. Doctoral scholars are presented workshops on such strategies, and a

highly competitive job market makes them an eager audience. Academic self-promotion is hardly a new phenomenon; but the tools for doing it, and for pushing out one's work to others and not just waiting for them to search and find it, is a natural outgrowth of an overcrowded academic marketplace. While normally uncompensated, blog posts and other forms of online publishing are one way to get one's ideas into circulation — and even a modest online presence can reach a far greater number of readers than the average journal article. These new dynamics of publishing and reading raise further questions about what in fact constitutes 'impact' today.

New search engines, especially Google Scholar, influence how people search for and find research. One can image the use of artificial intelligence programs to provide a similar service to Amazon: 'If you liked X, here is a link to Y'. Letting automated programs do the bulk of one's work in compiling literature reviews is another understandable response to the overwhelming glut of published work; but depending on the algorithms used this may have little to do with actual quality. Here, as elsewhere in this article, the result is a self-fulfilling circle: articles that (for whatever reason) are promoted by search engines will in fact be read more, cited more, and so appear to be more important. Frankly, it is not even unthinkable that as with other search pages some users might pay for the privilege of having their work featured first.

One of the many dangerous consequences of such searches is that, as with 'filter bubbles' more generally,[4] one's academic circle might become constrained by the workings of the Internet. Work of value but outside that circle might be harder to come across through serendipity. Familiar authors, familiar journals, familiar topics or theoretical approaches will be privileged, and the outliers disadvantaged. Something truly original and provocative might vault into general awareness, or languish in the digital shadows. Imagine if Wittgenstein had not studied under Bertrand Russell, had not taught at Cambridge, had not worked with the colleagues and students he did. It is not difficult to imagine, given his paucity of publication and lack of professional ambition, that he could have remained an obscure figure of very marginal historical interest.

As a result of the struggle to get one's work published—and noticed—and given the way search engines work, there are further strategies one could adopt. Using social media to push out and promote one's work, as noted earlier. Using a catchy title with highly searchable buzz words included. In the competitive 'attention economy' there might even emerge an academic version of 'clickbait': a not-always-accurate way of titling or describing one's work simply in order to attract attention and readership. Can scholarship avoid the kind of sensationalism that sells? It is important to remember that not all citations are favourable, not all downloads are a sign of importance or quality—nevertheless, these are the metrics many use.

## CONCLUSION

What I am describing here is a series of clashes. A clash between what we reward and what we say we want (Kerr, 1995). A clash between the

commercial self-interests and motivations of publishers and the academic self-interests and motivations of scholars. A clash between the reasons why we write and the incentive systems built into the institutions where we work. A clash between the intellectual quality and importance of what gets written and the practical dynamics of what actually gets noticed. These clashes are not irresolvable paradoxes, but they are serious tensions. And they are getting worse.[5]

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## NOTES

1. Wikipedia: Impact factor—criticisms. Available online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impact_factor. Last accessed: 22 April 2020.
2. It is important to note that some of these dramatic numbers are challenged by other researchers.
3. See also, Anonymous Academic, 'Pressure to publish in journals drives too much cookie-cutter research' *The Guardian*, 30 June 2017. Available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2017/jun/30/pressure-to-publish-in-journals-drives-too-much-cookie-cutter-research. Accessed 22 April 2020.
4. See Eli Pariser, 'Beware online 'filter bubbles'. Available online at: https://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles. Last accessed: 22 April 2020.
5. I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the comments and suggestions of Joyce Tolliver, as well as Paul Smeyers and other members of the Research Community, on a previous version of this paper.

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