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New development: Our hate–love relationship with publication metrics

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the increasing importance of publication metrics in research. Four themes are addressed: the impact of journal metrics on issues like research funding and tenure; the unintended consequences of these metrics; whether the niche domain of public sector accounting journals is threatened by these metrics; and how researchers can best deal with the mania surrounding journal metrics. This article is part of an ongoing and larger research project about the identity shift of public sector accounting researchers due to an increasing importance of publication metrics.

IMPACT

This article aims to contribute to awareness of the downsides of the use of publication metrics based on so-called ‘top’ journals. Various actors in the research domain will benefit from its findings, ranging from authors and supervisors to university managers and journal editors.

KEYWORDS

Coping strategies; H-index; intended and unintended consequences; journal impact factor; journal metrics; journal ranking; top journals

The increasing importance of publication metrics

Researchers are faced with an increasing pressure to publish in international ‘top’ journals. The degree to which journals are highly ranked seems to be solely determined by such publication metrics as the Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and the H-index. These metrics impact both the recruitment procedures for new staff members in universities and the protocols for assessing the research quality of the existing staff (see also Lewis, 2014). Journal rankings aim to encourage scholars, both individually and as members of a group or scientific community, to publish their work in journals which are considered as outlets for high-quality papers. Gendron (2015) claims that, in the assessment of funding proposals or in making promotion decisions, universities and research funding associations make use of productivity measures based on these journal rankings. If researchers do not perform well in the context of these rankings, they fear the risk of being regarded as ‘incompetent’ or at least unproductive (Gendron, 2015). Moreover, journal editors are eager to see their journals rise in the ranks in their domain.

Unintended consequences

Rather than the research content—for example for theory building or practical implications—it seems to be the type of journal in which a paper is published that matters the most. Adler and Harzing (2009),

however, argue that publications in top journals do not necessarily belong to leading research, while other publications in non-top journals can be considered as highly important in their field.

The most fundamental negative consequence of the metrics system is the endangerment of research diversity and research innovativeness. Under this system’s influence, scholars tend to engage in research projects that match the targeted journal. And, if top journals privilege particular types of research, other types of research may be disregarded: for example, US top accounting journals specifically adhere to economics-based, quantitative studies, while giving limited room to qualitative studies using social theories (Meyer, Waldkirch, Duscher, & Just, 2018). Roberts (2018) even argues that the North American élites of accounting scholars, especially the editors and editorial board members of the top journals, suffer from an overly narrow focus on what is proper accounting research. These élites not only prefer positivist types of research but also completely disregard studies that are based on an interpretive or critical paradigm. Roberts claims that the North American tendencies to produce and reproduce a dominant ideology form a hindrance for diversity and innovativeness of research (see also Deegan, 2016).

Furthermore, the eagerness of researchers to conduct studies that fit in with the accepted research traditions, and that are obviously less risky to undertake, will hinder the development of innovative research, aimed at new ways (theories) of looking at empirical phenomena (Merchant, 2010; Alvesson &

Sandberg, 2014). In a research community that is crossing national boundaries, the tendency towards internationalization compromises local research history and traditions. Also, the need to publish in highly-ranked international journals promotes strategic networking activities and increases competition among scholars. Particularly the latter may ultimately contribute to unhealthy work environments where, in the extreme focus on research results, the quality of teaching can be compromised (Kallio, Kallio, & Grossi, 2017).

Threats for the niche of public sector accounting

This section discusses the specific rankings of public sector accounting journals (i.e. FAM, JAPP, JPBAFM and PMM) in comparison with those of general accounting journals (such as JAE, AOS, AAAJ and CPA) and public administration and public management journals (such as PAR and PMR); see Table 1 for full names of these journals and their abbreviations. Many public sector accounting researchers publish in the above categories of journals.

Table 1 provides five metrics related to the above indicated categories of journals: the H-index, the JIF scores, the SJR (Scimago Journal Ranking), and the rank according to the business school rankings in the UK and Australia. The definitions and sources of these metrics are explained in the table's notes. The overall picture is that public sector accounting journals are ranked lower than the international top and sub-top journals in accounting and public administration/public management. So, if public sector accounting scholars are encouraged or even forced to publish their work in the highest ranking journals, the public sector accounting journals become less attractive or may even have to be ignored. This development may have far-reaching consequences, i.e. for the extent to which specific (public sector) audiences are reached and for the content of the research in terms of themes, theories and methods. In our opinion, public sector accounting journals are distinctive due to a close connection of the research to organizational and societal issues in practice, and also because the research is often inspired by ideas of other than the accounting discipline, especially from public administration and organizational science. These indicated risks for public sector accounting research are also apparent in other niche accounting domains and related journals, such as accounting history and accounting education (Sangster, 2015). In addition, other national journal rankings may, to some extent, diverge from the internationally known ones, causing confusion in this respect among the scholars in these countries.

How to live with journal metrics

Publication metrics and their possible unbalanced use in the assessment of research quality are a reality that we will have to live with. However, we envisage several ways of mitigating the dominance of so-called top journals in the assessment of research.

There is no winner

A pragmatic route is the preference of journal lists that decline the idea of 'the winner takes all', i.e. the lists that only acknowledge top journals and ignore all other journals. By also including 'middle-ranked' journals, especially in the fields of applied research, such as public sector accounting research, or in new research fields such as qualitative studies, pluralism in research would be stimulated. Furthermore, one could expand the criteria for assessing research quality beyond publication output, for instance by including review and editorial work, and the organization of conferences and workshops. Reducing the emphasis on and obsession with the publication metrics' discourse might break the vicious circle in which the number of papers published in highly-ranked journals becomes more important than, for example the learning experience of conducting a research project, including writing a doctoral dissertation.

Consider societal impact

In a similar vein, research impact could be expanded to include societal impact. In his review of experiences with assessments in relation to the societal impact of research, Bornmann (2013) argues that various methods can be used, ranging from econometric studies (for example for evaluating the economic benefits of certain research findings), and surveys (in which stakeholders can show their appreciation of research outcomes) to case studies (as best practice examples of the assessment of the societal impact of research). Bornmann also indicates that for research to be of significance to society, it needs to include the views of the relevant stakeholders about what is important for society's economic, social or cultural well-being. Because there is no shared understanding of indicator sets on the societal impact of research, a system of expert panels, including research stakeholders, has currently seemed to be the best achievable option. It is our impression that the societal impact of research is measured separately from academic quality, and that the latter is considered as far more important than the former. It may even be argued that the societal impact of research, just as teaching quality, is merely perceived as a 'cosmetic' factor—which has to meet a minimum standard—whereas

Table 1. Journal metrics.

Metrics Journal	H-index *	JIF **	SJR ***	ABS listing (UK) ****	ABDC listing (Australia) *****
Accounting journals:					
Abacus	90	2.200	0.889	3	A
Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal (AAAJ)	164	2.537	1.456	3	A
Accounting, Organizations and Society (AOS)	262	3.147	2.036	4*	A*
Contemporary Accounting Research (CAR)	166	2.261	2.895	4	A*
Critical Perspectives on Accounting (CPA)	119	2.528	1.853	3	A
European Accounting Review (EAR)	131	2.322	1.505	3	A*
Journal of Accounting and Economics (JAE)	299	3.753	6.606	4*	A*
Journal of Accounting Research (JAR)	250	4.891	10.151	4*	A*
Management Accounting Research (MAR)	175	4.044	2.166	3	A*
The Accounting Review (TAR)	246	4.562	5.240	4*	A*
Public administration and public management journals:					
Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory (JPART)	166	3.407	5.875	4	A
Public Administration (PA)	150	2.600	2.287	4	A
Public Administration Review (PAR)	199	4.659	4.120	4*	A
Public Management Review (PMR)	96	3.162	1.756	3	A
Public sector accounting journals:					
Financial Accountability & Management (FAM)	84	NA	0.576	3	A
Journal of Accounting and Public Policy (JAPP)	124	2.269	1.481	3	A
Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting & Financial Management (JPBAFM)	36	NA	0.303	2	B
Public Money & Management (PMM)	67	1.215	0.561	2	A

*The H-index is the number of H-publications with a number of Google Scholar citations larger than or equal to H. (Source: Publish or Perish software by Harzing, search executed via Google Scholar with the full name of the journal and limited to 1000 papers, 24–31 July 2019.) Note that, in general, ‘older’ journals benefit in their H-index in comparison to ‘younger’ journals.

**JIF = Journal Impact Factor (2018) is the number of cites in 2018 of items published in 2017 and 2016, divided by the number of items published in 2017 and 2016, as calculated by InCites Journal Citation Reports—Clarivate Analytics. (Source: <https://jcr.clarivate.com/JCRLandingPageAction.action>, accessed 26 July 2019.) For two public sector accounting journals, the JIF score is not available because these journals are not included in the Web of Science.

***SJR = Scimago Journal Rank (2018) is the indicator that accounts for both the number of citations from a journal and the importance or prestige of this journal, as calculated by Scimago Journal and Country Rank. (Source: <https://www.scimagojr.com/>, accessed 26 July 2019.)

****Journals are ranked as 1 (lowest), 2, 3, 4 and 4* (highest). (Source: Academic Journal Guide of Chartered Association of Business Schools (ABS) UK, 2018).

*****Journals are ranked as C (lowest), B, A and A* (highest). (Source: ABDC, Australian Business Deans Council, 2016.) Note: A new ABDC journal ranking list is expected to be issued soon.

academic quality measured through journal metrics is core for academic success.

A shift back to content

A more difficult route to mitigate the dominance of top journals in research assessments relates to changing how university managers, like deans and department heads, assess research quality. Currently, they mainly look at figures, i.e. the ratings of journal publications. This approach is encouraged by the imitation effect of ‘if others do so, then we will too!’ A shift back towards the content of research is desirable, requiring these managers to do some reading work and act as peers for their colleagues. This route to content would also enable a less mechanistic and standardized way of assessing research quality: what matters here is what the work to be scrutinized achieves within a certain field, rather than in what type of journal it is published.

Emphasize the local needs and strategies

Universities around the world may have different strategies and local needs. They may also find themselves at different quality assessment stages. Assessing research needs to be part of a more holistic evaluation process which emphasises the uniqueness, rather than the degree of standardization, of universities. As argued by Aguinis, Cummings, Ramani, and Cummings (2019), universities might be either research-

or teaching-oriented, and it would be beneficial to weigh the respective outputs when assessing research quality. A teaching-oriented university might reward the publication of textbooks more generously than a university that is heavily research-oriented.

Preserve pluriformity

Journal editors have the difficult dual task of competing with other journals in a playing-field where journal metrics are crucial, while simultaneously they have to propagate their distinctive profile, as in the case of PMM, by being relevant to both practitioners and academics. For reasons of an eclectic research field, pluriformity of journal profiles remains important. The danger is, however, that publication metrics are contributing to more uniformity towards an academic profile of journals, while retaining an academic-professional profile for a journal, such as in the case of PMM, will be harder to accomplish.

A possible downside of researchers’ focus on publishing in academic journals as a consequence of the importance of publication metrics is that they are likely to be less interested in making their findings accessible to practitioners.

Concluding remarks

What remains is a hate–love relationship with journal lists and their use. In faculty meetings, these lists are

criticised for their bias towards studies propagated by the élites in the field. At the same time, whenever a paper is accepted by a top journal, researchers are usually all too happy to share their academic achievement. Although many of them feel some degree of resistance towards journal lists, researchers are just as easily prepared to surrender to them at the expense of the traditional academic values (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; see also Northcott & Linacre, 2010). So there is some schizophrenia in dealing with the system of journal lists: we show our disapproval towards colleagues but are also eager to score according to these systems. In public, researchers refer to their publications in terms of citations and journal impact factors, as these form part of the current academic discourse. But they hide their frustration and worries about the difficulty of getting their work published. An example of the academic poker face!

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