Modes of Publication and Scientific Quality

Brante, Thomas

Published in:
SciComInfo

2005

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

ScieCominfo, no. 3, 2005

Modes of Publication and Scientific Quality

Thomas Brante
Professor
Department of Sociology
University of Lund

In her article *Open Access and Journal Publication in the Social Sciences and the Humanities,* Dr Director Ulla Carlsson raises interesting questions concerning the currently strong tendency to steer the "softer" sciences to adopt quality criteria employed in the "harder" sciences. One frequently suggested way of doing this is by measuring scientific quality primarily or solely by degree of publication in international, peer-reviewed journals. Such a method would facilitate comparisons between individual authors, departments as well as universities, locally as well as internationally. It would also provide simple, mechanic measures for resource allocation.

In order to make clear what the suggestion might imply, let me take up an example. In a recent, well-known study by Simon Hix, London School of Economics, political science departments are internationally ranked. Hix measured quality by counting how many articles a university department had published in certain international journals using anonymous referees. The sum was divided by the number of researchers at the department, and the resulting figure is used to position the university on the quality list.

Swedish universities unfortunately ranked quite low. Gothenburg ended up at position 223, Stockholm 318 and Uppsala 377, out of 400 universities – a result that, unsurprisingly, started some heated debate in Sweden where one professor claimed that in order to make Swedish universities climb on the list, from now on, national resource allocation should be governed by this measure only, in all disciplines.

Now Hix himself raises some doubts about his method. For example, referee-evaluations are subjective, political scientists publish in different ways, e.g. by writing whole books or articles in anthologies, and these publications are not included or 'caught' by his measure. Further, many social scientists prefer to publish in their own language.

However, there are more problems, of a structural kind. First there is the selection of journals that you must publish in. These are selected after 'impact', which is the number of citations the journal generates. (The citations are counted from a sample of primarily North American journals.) Of the 63 journals, at the top position we find *American Political Science Review*, followed by *American Journal of Political Science*, and the list shows that almost exclusively, American or Anglo-saxon journals are involved (only 6 journals are not written in English).

So which universities are the best in the world? 1. Columbia, 2. Harvard, 3. Stanford, 4. Ohio State, 5. European University Institute (English-speaking), 6. California, San Diago, 7. California, Irvine, 8. Indiana, 9. Princeton, 10. Yale, 11. California, Berkeley, 12. Michigan State, 13. Chicago, 14. California, Los Angeles. And so on.

It is not difficult to discern a clear connection here. It resides between American journals of political science with American political scientists as editors, in which American political scientists quote each other at the same time as they work at American universities and belong to the same American associations and meet at national American congresses.

It would have been interesting to see alternative lists, in which the selection of quoted journals had been undertaken by Russian, Chinese, French, German or Brazilian political scientists. I suspect that the ranking order would have differed substantially, and that the American universities quite naturally would have ended up in considerably more modest positions.

Examples of proposals for introducing methods of this kind for measuring and ranking scientific quality can be multiplied. Their virtue is of course their simplicity and straight-forwardness. However, serious doubts can be raised concerning their validity. Do they really measure what they are supposed to measure?

The issue of validity is what Ulla Carlsson also raises, in her last but one paragraph: -'How fair a measure is publication? Does something go lost if we concentrate too narrowly on international publication? What are the consequences of the fact that what we call "international publication" today is in essence publication in the Anglo-American sphere?"

In my opinion, the validity of these measures must be very low. First, productivity is not tantamount to quality, and second, productivity is not tantamount to publishing in Anglo-american journals. Thus, I don't think Swedish universities, or for that matter Russian or French, which for self-evident reasons also rank low on Hix's scale, should care or worry too much about results of this kind, and above all, they should not let them govern their research policy.

Another way of discussing and evaluating proposals for new quality measures is to start with the current research- and publication situation for the social sciences and the humanities. (Obviously, behind all proposals for new measures is the assumption that the present situation is poor, badly in need of improvement.) Let me do this by presenting four types of Swedish social scientists (the examples are real):

- Scientist A writes ten articles per year, in the right journals. Hence, A is obviously productive. The problem is that by and large, A writes the same article all the time; the differences concerns the title, some ways of reasoning, some references. A frequently visits international congresses, presenting the same thesis year in and year out.

- Scientist B sends out a questionnaire to 500 individuals. It contains questions about some background variables plus 50 other questions. The answers are run through a statistical computer program. Thereafter, B takes the background variables and one or two of the other questions and writes a five-page article of the results. It takes three days. B does the same with the other variables, generating 25 articles that are published in refereed journals suitable for the purpose. This procedure is repeated each year, engendering an enormous productivity.

- Scientist C publishes one article every second year. The article is always very well formulated, well thought out, original and innovative. (C thinks that far too much rubbish is written – writing for its own sake – and does not want to contribute to the overproduction of trivialities.)

- Scientist D writes his own books, participates in anthologies, publishes articles in Swedish journals and debates in the media. Keeping *á jour* with the research front, D writes textbooks that are used in university education. However, he writes in Swedish only.

If the suggestions for increasing productivity would be firmly implemented, C (the intellectual) and D (the nationally oriented) are indeed unproductive and superfluous at the future university. What remains will be the to the American norm well - adapted 'publication neurotics.'

Is this a desirable scenario? Is Swedish social science (and the humanities) to be pursued in order to enhance Sweden's international reputation? Or should it be pursued in order to increase our knowledge about social reality, and to deliver it also to the Swedish people, who indeed picks up the bill for it?

The problem with Swedish social science is not that we are not sufficiently subordinated to American journals and research orientations. And it is not that scientists need new structures of incitement, that is, are stimulated to obtain means to their department by working strategically in order to increase publication in the right journals. The problem is what has been emphasized in several reports during the last decade; that decreasing funding and increasing work-loads (more students, more of the third task, more administrative work, more applications for decreasing external research funds, more political steering etc) leads to decreased research time. You cannot "do research" effectively for one hour between two hours of lecturing and another administrative meeting about the Bologna process. Research requires longer uninterrupted time intervals, which is in short supply at Swedish universities today.

The solution to the problem is not more steering, not more centralization and slow large-scale programs, but the opposite: the return of resources to the faculties, departments and single scientists. With increased autonomy, social scientists and humanists can more easily adopt to the international research front. In this context, open access publications would be a powerful tool for improving scientific discussion and quality *per se*. And quality should be measured with several criteria, including perhaps more difficult and cumbersome but also much more valid criteria such as originality and depth. The standards of science should not be sacrificed on the altar of bureaucratic rationality!