

Openness and Democratic Discourse in Academic Publishing

Position Statement

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Introduction

The evaluation of a scholar's research output is of key importance to the academic life. It not only controls tenure and promotion decisions, but it also plays a key role in the awarding of grants and recognition awards such as Leo Awards and AIS Fellowships. It is therefore extremely important that this evaluation be done not only efficiency but with effectiveness, openness, transparency and fairness. The Scholarly Influence Research Group (SIR) has argued that the existing methodology for evaluating a scholar's output has not had those characteristics and needs to be reformed. We argue that the received method, counting publications in ranked journals, while efficient, is ineffective, a-theoretical, and at least potentially biased. It also tends to distort the discourse of the field in unhealthy ways. In its place we argue that we should assess the scholar's influence on the field by means of a profile of measures based on influence. Adopting these types of measures, we argue, we will be more effectively evaluating a scholar's contribution, eliminate distortion of the discourse and create the true open, transparent and democratic discourse necessary for the success of scholarly endeavor.

The Existing Methodology

Description

The received methodology for evaluating scholarly performance is by counting publications in a ranked list of journals. This list of journals is arranged in strata intending to represent descending levels of quality. Publication in a journal thus represents an article being of a certain quality. This approach provides a pragmatic and efficient solution to the problem of how to evaluate scholars from many different fields. By using the journal review process of the field as the arbiter of quality, evaluation teams, who may have been drawn from other academic disciplines, are provided an implicit warrant to the scholar's quality in his home discipline, thus alleviating the reviewers of the need to critically examine individual research outputs.

Critique

For the field to progress, we argue that there must be an open and democratic discourse in which all ideas are considered and fairly and openly evaluated. Based on Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action and (Habermas 1984; 1985) as further developed by Mingers and Walsham (2010), we argue that this democratic discourse is characterized by openness, equal participation, truthfulness and lack of privilege of ideas. By utilizing an evaluation system based on publication in selected journals, we argue that this approach is not fully open or participative as the ability to publish in these journals are in the hands of a select few individuals who may or may not have the best interests of the field in mind. It is also not open since given a limited page space in these journals, not all ideas can be published. This limitation on idea privileges those ideas whom the journal editors hold to be the most worthy of being allowed to enter the discourse (Truex III et al. 2011b).

Our evaluation methods have resulted in a truncation of the discourse in the field. At the ICIS 2012 Philosophy Special Interest Group Meeting, Grover and Lyytinen made a presentation in which they argued that our present set of institutions made for a field that followed a script that was very good at producing research that answered the established issues of the field but was not good at investigating ideas at the “fringes” of the field: theoretical ideas without empirical support, nor empirical ideas without theoretical support. The Senior Scholars panel also presented a general dislike of the current method, but neither group suggested a proposal for revision.

The SIR Group Proposal

Influence for Quality

We present an alternative proposal for evaluation of scholarly output. First, we argue that the concept of the quality of an academic product is under theorized (Locke et al. 2002; Straub et al. 2010). Academic output quality is an undefined largely subjective notion and therefore cannot truly be operationalized in any effective manner. Indeed the idea of quality, like that of success or beauty is a subjective notion and therefore we are skeptical that it can be operationalized effectively.

In its place we suggest, the concept of influence, the ability of a scholar to have his/her ideas considered by others in the course of their own research (Truex III et al. 2011a) be considered as the evaluative concept. In addition to being defined, it has been the subject of 80 years of research in the information science field (Egghe 2005; Freeman 1979; Lotka 1926). Well-defined methods have been devised to evaluate this concept which we propose be applied to evaluate a scholar’s influence.

Types of Influence

It has been suggested that there are three types of influence, ideational influence, the uptake of a scholar’s ideas by the field, which can be measured by the use of the Hirsch indices (Truex III et al. 2009; 2011a; Vidgen et al. 2013); social influence, ability to influence others through the processes of social interaction, which can be measure through the use of social network analysis (Takeda et al. 2012; Truex III et al. 2011a); and venue influence, the ability of a scholar to influence the thought of the field by virtue of the venues in which he/she publishes (Vidgen et al. 2013) which can be evaluated by social network analysis (Vidgen et al. 2013). A similar approach has been taken to evaluate journals (Cuellar et al. 2008). By developing a profile of these different measures, it can be shown the different types of influence a scholar has had and can be used as a basis of comparison of one scholar against another and against a standard used for promotion and tenure. These three types of influence have been merged into a single Scholarly Influence Model (figure 1) (Vidgen et al. 2013).

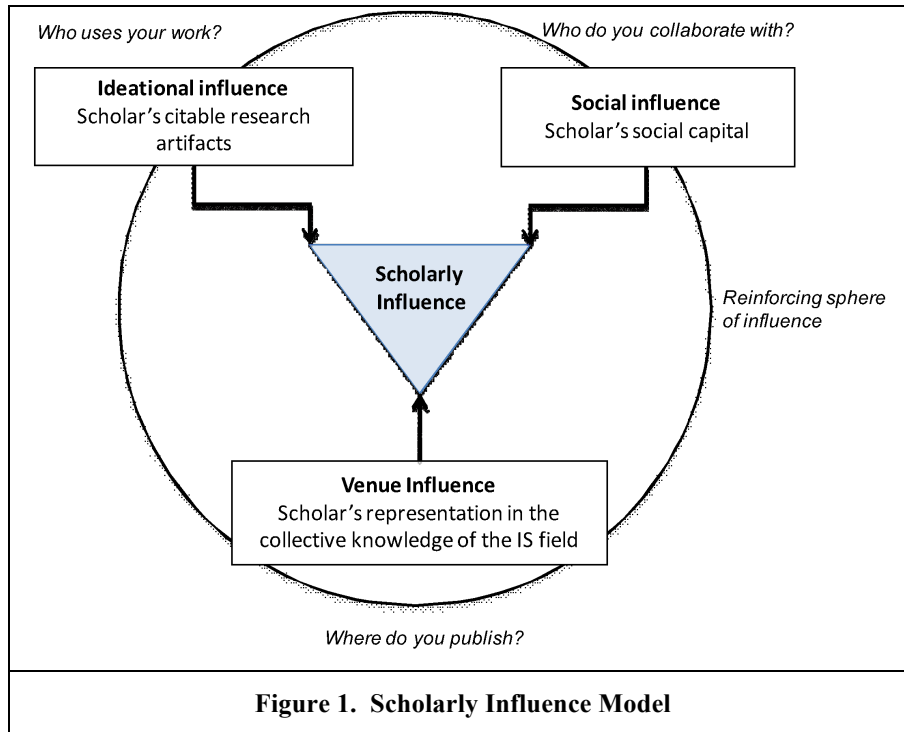


Figure 1. Scholarly Influence Model

Benefits of this approach

We argue that this approach will help improve the democratic discourse within the field. By adopting this methodology of evaluating scholarly output, we increase the openness of the field. Because these methods decenter the venue of publication as the arbiter of the worth of the contribution in favor of uptake of the ideas in the form of citations or co-authorships or affiliation within the field, all comers can enter the field and be considered equally. Their uptake by the field is now the standard vs. the ability to negotiate the review process. Similarly, the ability to participate is increased because the leveling of the venues and the electronic availability of journals that makes for equal availability. The use of citation and co-authorship as the measure also allows all to participate on an equal footing. The privileging of ideas is reduced through the more equal availability of articles to the field. The use of influence eliminates the idea of privileging any one venue and its editors as the arbiters what is worthy to be considered. Finally, truthfulness is increased through the use of crowd review (Surowiecki 2005). The more eyes will find untruthful statements and eliminate them from the discourse.

Conclusion

The evaluation of scholarly output is a key consideration for all in academia. The current method of such evaluation, counting papers published in ranked venues, is a problematic method that results in distortion of the discourse and creates problems for the development of our field. We propose that the concept of influence be substituted for that of quality as the concept under evaluation and that the three sub constructs of ideational, social and venue influence be measured to create a profile of influence that can be evaluated. We argue that this will create a more open, participative, truthful and democratic discourse.

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