

Two Brief Points on Publication Impact

Commentary

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Pablo J. Boczkowski and Michael X. Delli Carpini have done the field a great service with “On Writing in Communication and Media Studies.” I predict the article will soon become a classic of first-year PhD proseminars given its clarity and efficacy in laying out the inner workings of the major genres of writing in which we most often participate. In this response, I want to make two brief points, both of which pertain to the general issue of how the impact of various forms of scholarly writing should be assessed. Questions of impact are inseparable from discussions of scholarly writing in any discipline, as the incentives in place for various writing genres will, to a substantial extent, determine how much of each genre is produced. Here I argue first that we should consider impact primarily at the level of the writing product as opposed to the journal or outlet level. Second, and relatedly, optimally assessing impact requires knowing which values of each metric count as outstanding, and that requires distributions of impact metrics for scholars in the same subfield who started publishing around the same time. Working toward such a solution would generate an empirical basis for standards of impact, which our field currently lacks.

Article Impact Over Journal/Outlet Impact

The most widely shared definitions of research impact involve citations. In the simplest formulation, more citations translate linearly into greater impact. Citation-based impact most commonly attaches to three main entities: writing products (e.g., journal articles, books, reports, dissertations), individuals, and writing outlets (usually scholarly journals). Databases such as Google Scholar and Web of Knowledge’s Journal Citation Reports allow users to view citation counts for all three entities. Over the past decade or so, the ability to conveniently compute individual citation counts has led to such counts being used as evidence of significant impact in tenure and promotion (T&P) letters (more on that in the next point). But traditionally, our field has been overly concerned that T&P candidates publish in the “top” journals (however defined)—that ostensibly being evidence of quality scholarship. Citation-based metrics such as the journal impact factor and h-index are often used as evidence that a given journal occupies the top tier of its subdiscipline, or of the discipline as a whole. T&P candidates are, depending on the department, often either strongly advised or outright commanded to publish most of their work in top journals.

I will advance the possibly controversial position that this practice is deeply flawed and instead argue for an alternative based on individual article impact. The weaknesses of what might be called the “top-journal” approach derive from fundamental inconsistencies in the peer-review process that have been documented over the past four decades. Of particular concern has been the repeated finding that article acceptance is, to a great extent, a function of reviewer selection—a state of affairs that bears a greater resemblance to randomness than meritocracy (Cole, Cole, & Simon, 1981; Peters & Ceci, 1982; Rothwell &

Martyn, 2000). Of course, this is not to claim that our journals would be better served by a lottery system for determining article publication—perhaps the greatest service editors and referees perform is to reject the many low-quality submissions every half-decent journal inevitably receives. But above a certain baseline threshold of journal quality, diverging opinions regarding theoretical coherence, methodological rigor, and practical significance often lead referees to recommend very different fates for the same article. This substantially undercuts the rationale for using journal-level impact metrics as proxies for research quality.

A better way would consider impact primarily at the writing product level as opposed to the journal level. A brief thought experiment might help illustrate the advantages of such an approach. Consider the differences between article A, published in a top journal as defined above but only receiving a few citations, and article B, published in a mid-tier journal but receiving hundreds of citations. I would argue that B represents the more notable achievement. B cannot rely on the top journal's broad readership to deliver lots of attention and citations to the extent that A can, which raises the likelihood that B's high citation count is due more to its intrinsic scholarly interest than to the reputation of the journal in which it was published. I am not advocating a complete abandonment of consideration of publication venue quality—it is possible in principle that an article published in a predatory journal could attract lots of citations, and our impact evaluation procedures should account for such unethical manipulations. But as long as a journal meets some (to-be-determined) minimum editorial standard, we as a field should pay more attention to an individual article's impact than to that of the publishing outlet.

Impact Standards

How many citations constitute "a lot"? The answer depends on various factors, including how long a researcher has been publishing, the subfield in question, the publications in which the work has appeared, and the total number of writing products the researcher has generated. The fact that a hypothetical Professor Z has been cited X times (the actual value of X is unimportant) is less useful than it might be for T&P purposes without context. Those tasked with evaluating Professor Z might ideally like to know the percentile or rank into which X falls relative to other scholars in the same subfield and at the same career stage as Z. The data needed to compile such rankings are freely available through Google Scholar (and similar proprietary competitors such as Web of Knowledge), but the rankings themselves are currently available only for the world's most highly cited scholars (Aguillo, 2017; Ioannidis, Baas, Klavans, & Boyack, 2019). The rest of us have no systematic way of knowing where we stand relative to our peers.

Constructing such a system would be painstaking but not impossible. We could start by partitioning our discipline into subfields—the International Communication Association (n.d.) maintains a list of divisions and interest groups that could be used for this purpose. Registered ICA members can view the names of every group's members, which could then be used as search criteria to identify and categorize data from corresponding public Google Scholar profiles. (This would only work for divisions in which many members have claimed such profiles.) Within each division and year of first publication, scholars could then be compared based on total citation counts, h-indexes, and total numbers of publications. For example, I would compare my impact metrics to those of other members of the political communication division who published their first scholarly works in 2010, as I did. I might proudly provide my metric ranks or percentiles to a T&P committee in support of my claims of impact. Such a resource, were some enterprising and generous party

to build and continuously maintain it, would go much further in demonstrating relative impact than unstandardized counts currently allow.

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