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Against Publication: The Case for Academics to Write Less

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The 'publish or perish' model fosters a culture of superficial scholarship, stifling genuine academic innovation and the teaching-learning process.

Newly appointed as the editors of an academic journal, a colleague and I awaited a meeting with the head of the India branch of a major academic publisher to renew our publishing contract. We had modest ideas to improve the journal: proper fact-checking, peer review in earnest, and more time for revisions. To maintain rigour, we proposed that 16–20 articles per year would be best, rather than the 26-odd that had become the norm in the two previous years.

Our concerns about quality did not make much headway. The pushback from the publisher was vehement. The journal was ‘doing well’ and they were not interested in ‘moving backwards’. It was our job to ensure that a larger number of articles were published—whether as 10,000-word peer-reviewed papers or as 2,000-word editorials did not matter.

Following the initial exchange, we eventually reached a ‘compromise’ of 24 articles. But every year, like clockwork, the publisher’s asked-for number went up. ‘Growth’ was the most commonly-used word; balance sheets showing increasing profits were shared with us. When we tried to resist, the calls and emails from the publisher grew increasingly aggressive. When the contract next came up for renewal, the demand was for 30 articles a year.

The Publication Matrix

It should be evident that my title is clickbait. This article does not argue against academic publication in general. Writing and its circulation are obviously central to the accretion of knowledge, to science, to education. What I want to comment on is the commodification of research and its immersion in the discourse of metrics, databases, publication targets, publication profiles, impact factors, citation statistics, university rankings, and the image of the academic profession that is produced as a result. Thousands of academics are squarely situated within this publication matrix; thousands of their formal and informal interactions—in editorial meetings, faculty meetings, HR meetings, meetings on 'internal quality', conferences, workshops, job interviews, promotion panels—embody this discourse and sustain its power.

> If publications and citations become prized as things, they will be bought and sold like any other thing.

Perhaps the most perfect manifestation of this discourse is the ubiquitous workshops on ‘how to publish’ or ‘how to plan your publications’. These sometimes involve conversations on the writing process or on how to think about the substance of one’s research, but they are mainly or even entirely focused on how to make one’s way in this matrix: how to balance considerations such as impact factor and turnaround time when choosing which journals to submit to, how to maximise the number of publications on one’s CV, how to get these publications cited. Nowhere else has the process of publication been so abstracted from the substance of writing and research. Nowhere else does the contemporary discourse of publication appear in as clear and transparent a manner. Publication is in itself the purpose, not a mere mechanism for the diffusion of knowledge.

The publication matrix is so normalised in many academic circles that academics struggle to see outside it. Like other hegemonic normative frameworks, it closes off the imagination. This is especially true if they are young and have not seen the academic profession in operation before the matrix developed its current discursive power. ‘Publish or perish’ was already heard in many academic worlds. The labour of authors, editors, and peer reviewers was already extracted for free and sold for profit by large publishing houses, but it was possible even within this structure to think beyond it, to see a space for academic learning that was not governed by numbers.

The Publication Target

A few colleagues and I have just attended a lecture, and as it is a lovely March day, we take our time strolling to our offices from the venue. The conversation drifts from the topic of the lecture to our own research. One colleague explains their PhD proposal to me, and

then adds, a little hesitantly, that they feel compelled to attempt researching other areas in order to produce publications. They ask me if they should worry about not publishing regularly, whether it might affect their job and potential promotion, and how much of their research and writing should be oriented towards publishing multiple articles while the dissertation is still being prepared. They feel it affects their focus on their PhD, but they are expected by their institution to publish a certain number of indexed publications. The anxiety in their voice is palpable.

The publication target is a pernicious thing. This is not an objection to ambition. Academics are naturally motivated to write and publish when they have the inclination and desire to do so. Authors of important scholarly contributions and works of reference are justly rewarded for their work with recognition and engagement. Where the publication target becomes pernicious is when it is set externally or institutionally and is accompanied by direct or subtle pressure, by the stated or unstated 'or perish'.

> The pressure to publish has led to the phenomenon of fake peer review, where authors set up fake academic profiles that they then suggest as peer reviewers for their work.

Why do I insist on the word *pernicious*? It is because the publication target puts the cart of publication before the horse of writing. It makes the academic want to publish before they have something to say or contribute to the body of knowledge in their field. It pushes the academic to hurry the process of study and research. It pushes young scholars to aim for publications when they are not yet confident of their own writing ability: this is why so many are keen to do collaborative work. It leads academics to write about topics they have little to no expertise on. Conventional standards[1] of academic depth and quality are seen not as central to the whole exercise, but rather as necessary but unfortunate procedural requirements, the way we may conceive of administrative paperwork.

The compromises made by the writer often do not have a corollary effect on the article's chances of publication. This is because editors are themselves pressured to meet targets. I have been involved in several editorial meetings where we searched for reasons to justify the publication of an underdeveloped or unoriginal article, which, but for the targets, we would not have considered. Since our targets were accompanied by strict deadlines, we often had to compromise the peer review and fact-checking process that we had worked hard to establish. We realised early on that of the three parameters of volume, speed, and quality, only two could be achieved simultaneously. It was clear which one lost out.

Along with the undermining of academic standards, the publication matrix and publication targets encourage several dubious practices. The same argument is published in two different places with the title and a few commas changed. Senior scholars hijack the work of junior scholars to claim co-author status; the juniors consent to this inequitable arrangement because the senior name will help them 'land' the publication. Academics become so desperate to hit the publication target that they will write anything and publish it anywhere, which is why we end up with (to cite just one egregious example) articles on administrative law in a journal of physiotherapy.

The pressure to publish has led to the phenomenon of fake peer review, where authors set up fake academic profiles that they then suggest as peer reviewers for their work. The pressure to not just be published but be cited has created the practice of authors paying others to cite their work, including the possibility of backdated citations, i.e., citations that refer to the work before it was written. Those who engage in these practices do not deserve scorn: they feel trapped in the publication matrix, with no other way out. Those who offer these services also do not deserve scorn for seeing a business opportunity and exploiting it. These are inevitable outcomes of the commodification of research: if publications and citations become prized as things, they will be bought and sold like any other thing. Our critical gaze should be directed at the forces that create and perpetuate these market conditions.

From Teaching to Research

The constitution of publication as a central career objective in much of academia also has a detrimental effect on teaching. Publication pressure tends to make academics invest less in their teaching. I know a senior academic who advises fresh scholars not to spend too much time and effort on developing their teaching skills, because publication is the key to establishing an academic career. There are conversations around teaching in many institutions, and even the occasional workshop/seminar, but not nearly as many as there are around writing and publication.

> More pressure on academics to publish means more articles written; more articles written means more articles sold.

This is unfortunate, for several reasons. It is primarily unfortunate because it shortchanges students, who are in the university for education, not for research. It is unfortunate because it diminishes the student-teacher bond and hence the role of the scholar in the public imagination. It also tends to make us conceive of teaching as an ordinary professional task, and not the vocation it was once supposed to be. And finally, it is unfortunate because not caring about teaching impoverishes our writing. Writing is itself a form of teaching. A classroom lecture communicates, informs, provokes thought, creates new pathways of knowledge; to be effective, it needs clarity, structure, foresight, depth, sensitivity to its audience, and perhaps a dash of style. Writing too requires all this.

The question remains as to why this shift from teaching to research has taken place. Regulatory bodies have typically not been the driving forces (though we shall see how, in India, existing regulatory frameworks have been co-opted). The publication matrix is primarily constituted by the interaction of two actors: academic publishers and the universities themselves.. The profit motive behind the former's enthusiastic participation is obvious. More pressure on academics to publish means more articles written; more articles written means more articles sold; the buyers are the libraries of the very same institutions whose academic staff labour to produce the articles.

It is harder to explain the institutional acquiescence in or perpetuation of the publication discourse. Far from dictating terms to the publishing houses as one might assume—given that they are both the suppliers and the consumers of academic publications— academic institutions have, by and large, adopted their language and facilitated their practices. Why has this happened? Why do many universities pressure their staff to publish more rather than publish better? Why do they push them to prioritise research over teaching? One answer lies in the manner in which research output must necessarily be quantified according to the logic of ranking and accreditation organisations that evaluate academic institutions and include research as a significant criterion, often relying on indexation as a marker of quality.

Indexes, Rankings, Accreditation

I wrote earlier that academics will sometimes write anything and publish it anywhere. The 'anywhere' is usually a journal that is indexed in SCOPUS or in the Web of Science databases.

Many academics will scour the list of indexed journals to find one that will publish their article quickly, without too much review. The journals will sometimes take a fee for publication. This kind of practice is easy to condemn because it is so evidently problematic, but the indexation system and academic metrics in general combine with publication targets to influence research in less visible—and thus more dangerous—ways, because they may influence the very nature of the research being undertaken.

> Indexation is presented as an objective indicator of academic quality, but this elides the fact that the databases meant to list quality publications are themselves run by publishing houses.

The pay-to-publish model allows for anything to be published; the 'high-impact' journal model, on the other hand, limits what will be published. If the most sought-after journals tend to publish a certain kind of work, we are more likely to undertake that kind of work. This has the effect of narrowing the scope of research, conditioning the choice of methodology, even influencing the choice of language. While these considerations vary across disciplines, the broader point should be evident: the publication matrix promotes conformity in research and may stifle academic innovation and creativity, which in turn risks reducing the amount of genuinely original and important contributions.

Further, indexation means nothing. It is presented as an objective indicator of academic quality, but this elides the fact that the databases meant to list quality publications are themselves run by publishing houses. The conflict of interest here is so huge that it has seemingly become invisible.

All of the above discourses and practices are fuelled and legitimised by the monster that is the university ranking system. The institutions demand more publications and citations from their employees because that will bolster them in the rankings. The reasons for this demand are not clear: it has not been established that a higher ranking leads to more admissions or more funding. Even within the logic of profit, the power of the rankings is mysterious. Just like publications, rankings become targets in themselves, which allows for new forms of institutional hierarchy and control. Entire departments have been created for this purpose, staffed by administrators who cannot help but see research in terms of numbers. These administrators, often academics themselves, question heads of departments for not producing enough volume of publications, sharing statistics to show that the per capita number of publications is higher in other institutions. No one asks how meaningful those publications are, what research goes into them, or who reads them.

A key element in the power of the publication matrix is the manner in which it has coopted existing regulatory and accreditation frameworks. The same numbers required to do better in private rankings are also needed to assure regulatory compliance, and the formal emphasis on publication metrics is more and more evident. The drive to transparency and 'efficiency' in some regulatory settings also contributes to an emphasis on quantifiable data of all kinds; not just research output but even education 'outcomes' become reduced to numbers in an Excel sheet.

Conclusion

To consider mechanisms of not just subverting or resisting but actively unravelling the publication matrix is an interesting thought experiment.

It would be fairly simple to begin this unravelling. It could begin by institutions withdrawing from all rankings. It could begin by all journals delisting themselves from major indexes and not renewing their contracts with large publishers, switching to open-access online publication instead—which would have wider reach than the traditional subscription model.

> It could begin and end with academics only writing when they have a genuine scholarly impulse to do so; when the pressure to publish is internal, not external.

It could begin by deans, chancellors, governing boards, vice-chancellors, heads of HR, heads of research departments, and everyone else involved abolishing all publication targets. Whether express or implied, short-term or long-term, strictly enforced or merely notional—targets would be clearly and formally abolished. Financial rewards for publication, if desired, would be granted only after an evaluation by a committee of experts in the field and not with reference to any metrics.

It could begin by individual academics seeking out open access publishing and never looking for a journal's impact factor or indexation status or the ranking of its host institution; instead, the paramount criteria would be relevance for the topic and the potential readership. It could begin and end with academics only writing when they have a genuine scholarly impulse to do so; when the pressure to publish is internal, not external.

If any of these fairly conservative thoughts feel radical, it is only because of the discursive power of the publication matrix and the normalisation of the commodification of research. It is evident that these measures would involve a normative shift in an entirely opposite direction to the one much of academia has taken; given the ever-increasing power of the matrix, none of the above is likely to happen. But imagining it is essential for the very concept of research to retain meaning.

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Footnotes:

1 The concept of academic 'quality' is a loaded one that may itself sustain privilege and social hierarchies. But some conception of academic merit is essential for the whole enterprise of science and research to have any meaning.

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