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Managing by measuring: Academic knowledge production under the ranks

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It is not virtue which can found a free intellectual order; it is a free intellectual order which can found intellectual virtue.

- Pierre Bourdieu, The Rules of Art, 1996

On the 21st of January 2012, mathematician Timothy Gowers wrote a blog post in which he listed a number of problems related to the current system of scientific publishing and, in particular, what he described as the ill-doings of publisher Elsevier.[1] Gowers considered the high prices set on journals by publishing companies, the praxis of 'blackmailing' libraries to buy bundles of journals and the way publishing companies tried to block the on-going process towards more open access publishing

[1] http://gowers.wordpress.com/2012/01/21/elsevier-my-part-in-its-

especially harmful to the research community. Another issue that Gowers' blog post touched upon was the ambiguities inherent in the publishing system. On the one hand, we have the researchers and the ethics of the research community. As we know from Robert Merton,[2] researchers are urged to work in rather disinterested and communistic modes: helping colleagues in peer-review processes, returning favours to editors of journals in their specific field of expertise, i.e. neglecting the 'real' economy. On the other hand, there are publishing companies that follow the logic of profit where the craft of researchers are transformed into corporate revenue. The object of Growers' irritation, Elsevier, is one of the biggest players in the oligarchic market of scientific journals; a conglomerate that in 2010 had a profit margin of a stunning 36%, earning €724 million out of a total revenue of €2 billion.[3]

In the current state of affairs, researchers work with hardly any costs to the publishing companies because they seek recognition from and among their peers in the academic community. The publishing companies, on their end, leverage on this ethos and are able to push their profit margins to new heights by extorting public resources (funds of salaries as well as libraries). The market idea of the research community, as a whole, can thus be summarized as: *work for free, and then buy the work back expensively*. No wonder few public universities ever make any

[2] Merton, 1973

[3] Source: http://www.economist.com/node/18744177 . These extraordinary high profit margins did not change much during the years the recent recession. Arnold & Cohen (2012) reports that the earnings of Elsevier have been steady around 33- 36 % in the years between 2008-2010, figures unheard of in many other braches during the financial downturn.

profit! Gowers concluded that the scientific community needed to organise and 'take a stand'. He wrote:

> It might seem inexplicable that this situation has been allowed to continue. After all, mathematicians (and other scientists) have been complaining about it for a long time. Why can't we just tell Elsevier that we no longer wish to publish with them? Well, part of the answer is that we *can*.

Gowers' blog post struck a chord with the research community of mathematicians – probably partly due to the strong symbolic position of which they had learned to associate his name – and went viral.[4] Gowers encouraged the scientists to boycott Elsevier for the time being. These measures would be a first step to *bundle back*, and to create more decent conditions for scientific research. After Gowers made his position official, many followed soon after. A webpage was set up where scientists from all over the world signed a protest, promising each other to avoid taking part in the voluntary work that help generate the high profit margins of giant companies, in this particular case Elsevier, while locking the knowledge away, inaccessible for public scrutiny and debate. At the point of writing this, one year after Gowers' initial petition, the number of people who have signed up for this protest has started to slow down. Despite the recent deceleration in sign-up rate, the

[4] Timothy Gowers is the Rouse Ball Professor of pure mathematics at the University of Cambridge (UK) and the recipient of many academic prices and honorariums, such as the 1998 Fields Medal for his contributions to functional analysis.

petition has gathered more than 13,200 researchers and has provoked a necessary debate.

In this first number of the new journal *Confero* we engage with questions that Gowers raised in his blog post regarding the conditions for academic knowledge production. Before outlining the content of our issue, however, we wish to address this debate from an additional point of departure. Staffan Larsson, an Emeritus Professor in Adult Education in Sweden, has claimed that a virtual '*economy of publications and citations' (EPC) is emerging*.[5] Calculations of publications and citations are used more and more to allocate resources (both financial and merit/prestige), to create incentives through measurements and standardized forms of quality, such as impact-factors, league tables and ISI-rankings.

The emergence of an economy of publications and citations arguably leads to a gradual shift in relationships between colleagues. As quality is reduced to measurable 'output', competition between colleagues concentrate on their publications record, rather than on seeking new knowledge or pursuing ground-breaking scholarship.

Furthermore, the emergence of league-tables and ranking-lists foster impact-anxieties among young aspiring researchers who are trying to find a place to publish their articles and, eventually, to obtain research funding, tenure or other symbolically important assets. Whether imaginary or real, the effect of the EPC leads academics to pursue publication strategies based on particular assessments of worth. As the current ISI-ranking systems are clearly dominated by English-

[5] Larsson, 2009

speaking countries, the research traditions stemming from these countries possess a privileged position to partake in the economy. For instance, the English-American interpreters of Pierre Bourdieu can easily become a much more lucrative group to cite than the original books or the many French scholars who have published their research elsewhere, at safe distance from the current dogma of 'publish or perish'. The irony here is that researchers working within, say, the French tradition of Bourdieu or Foucault are often better able to grasp the significance of the scientific fields and discursive battles that made Bourdieu into Bourdieu or turned Foucault into Foucault.[6]

In sociological terms, the opposition between Gower and Elsevier could be thought of as an inherent conflict between work and capital. Currently, the channels for communicating research are *not* owned by the ones that produce them. That global publishing companies are in the quest for financial return should hardly come as a surprise. What is at stake here is nothing less then the on-going commodification of research and research results.[7] If this is true then research ideas and methods that are believed to benefit the market of publications and citation are, in the long run, likely to be favoured by the wrong reasons.

In such a climate of scientific publishing, scholars are encouraged to embody more of an entrepreneurial vocational identity that 'produce' and 'sell' research rather then a curious scholar or team of scholars, that in disinterested modes, seek a better understanding of the world they live in. Having

[6] For Bourdieu's own view on scientific translations see: Bourdieu, 2000

[7] Hasselberg, 2012

outsourced essential aspects of the valuation of knowledge to blind bureaucratic regimes of quality assurance, it is arguable if scholars can be seen as a profession at all.[8]

Research runs the risk of becoming transformed into a textual commodity just like any other, where academic journals come to symbolize the privatization of knowledge by a *pay-to-view* logic.[9] Returning to the questions raised in the beginning of this text, it is about time for more scientific communities than the mathematical one to stand up for more autonomous conditions of assessing *quality* and making research results more easily available for the public as well as among scholars. We also need to develop new non-commercialized models of academic publishing.

In this first issue of *Confero* a series of papers target the market of academic publishing and the way the notion of quality is currently fabricated within and outside of this craft. Traditionally, the role of journals is seen as securing the quality of research through professional evaluation and to promote the dissemination of scientific discoveries, argumentation and results. Reading the contributions to this number of *Confero*, we understand that it is more to it than that.

Providing a both personal and political opening to this issue, Professor Ylva Hasselberg describes the current age of 'economic planning and regulation of science' and what

[8] Abbott, 1988.

[9] Recently, opposing the locking up of knowledge in academic journals, Aaron Swartz tried to make articles in JSTOR public by downloading entire archives at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
Prosecuted and under the threat of a 35-year sentence to prison, Swartz took his own life earlier this year. See Schwartz, 2013

consequences this has in terms of a conceptual change and redefinition of the notion of quality. Referring to the seminal work of Karl Polanyi,[10] Hasselberg claims that 'the freeing of the market mechanism' in fact needs comprehensive regulation and that, in the emerging market of academic knowledge, this regulation is heavily dependent on bibliometrics with its shallow and superficial quality-concept. She invites us into the professional life of a historian, pointing to the salient role of 'non-selective' and 'non-instrumental' reading as a necessary condition for original thoughts to emerge and, consequently, truly novel research findings. Hasselberg raises serious doubts regarding the actual quality of the emerging quality assurance systems, particularly in terms of all non-measurable elements. The on-going initiatives on an 'utilitarian' culture of reading thus risks promoting stupidity: 'If you only read things that are of certain use, thinking about waste, you read too narrowly, and will be more stupid as a result.' Concluding her essay *Drowning by numbers*, Hasselberg asks herself and her readers if reading 'will have to go underground' from here?

In the next essay, Hasselberg's doubts regarding the measurability of quality is further elaborated and discussed by Sven-Erik Liedman. Liedman's essay *Pseudo-quantities: New public management and human judgement* traces the current quality assessment system to the introduction of conjoined management models within academia and, above all, the prevailing effects of New Public Management (NPM) as a dominant ideology. In response to the current obsession of quantifying the unquantifiable, Liedman launces a new concept: *pseudo-quantities*. Contrary to real quantities, that does inform us about 'the number, weight or velocity of something', pseudo-

[10] Polanyi, 2001 [1944]

quantities are, according to Liedman, best seen as 'a quality that can more accurately be characterized verbally (either by description or by more expressive means)'. Emerging as a steering-mechanism within the wider tenets of neo-liberal governance, New Public Management (NPM) and the deployment of pseudo-quantities is not at all limited to the universities. Even though Liedman gives several vivid examples of how pseudo-quantities are launched from inside schools and universities – for instance in the form of league-tables and student grading – the full scope of his argument is even more far-reaching than that. Especially within countries with a big public sector gradually transformed by the dominant NPM-doctrine, pseudo-quantities are possible to identify in a growing number of professional fields as, for instance, within the sphere of medicine and law. Liedman argues that the deployment of blind quality measurements, under the pretext of efficiency, actually *de*-professionalises work. In hospitals, efficiency-rates become more important than the actual symptoms and in schools it becomes more important for the kids to learn how to spell 'critical thinking' correctly, than to act and think this way.

Returning to the scientific trade: research 'output' is commonly measured and evaluated when researchers apply for funding. This is the point of departure in Professor Diana Hicks' essay *One size doesn't fit all* where she provides an overview of differences in scholastic output from various disciplines and countries. Hicks presents an analysis of publication practices in contemporary history, focusing particularly on the differences between natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities. Hicks shows that while natural scientists primarily publish in international journals, social scientists have a more varied publication pattern that encompasses books, national journals

and enlightenment literature. Because research outcomes today are based predominantly on citation incidences in international journals, Hicks argues that the social sciences and the humanities are disadvantaged structurally. That national evaluation systems, designed in a one size fits all form, adapt better to the practices of natural scientists than others is not a new argument. What Hicks' contribution illustrates clearly though, primarily by synthetizing a lot of research carried out in various fields and across geographical locations, is that future evaluation systems that fail to incorporate the variations in forms of publication will risk deteriorating the publishing traditions established within the humanities and the social sciences.

The next piece is this number, *Managing your assets in the publication economy*, is written by the bibliometrician, Ulf Kronman, who has developed a 'survival kit' for researchers in this age of digital scientific reproduction. Kronman provides a highly pedagogical account of how academic publications are used to assess impact and quality in research. By outlining the different steps of what happens to an article *after* publication, Kronman offers proficient insights to a scientific community that is increasingly guided by parameters, ranking lists and impact factors – but have not yet been fully familiarized with the rules of this game. Kronman's text shows *where*, *how* and *what* is being counted as valuable in the publication economy. Apart from advising individual researchers how to navigate within the system and maximize the exposure and dissemination of articles, Kronman challenges the researchers to come up with more apt ways of evaluating knowledge production. In a frank remark, Kronman summarizes the current state of affairs in following way: *'In the urging need for something to measure,*

governments and university managements turn to what can be measured, rather than what should be measured, since no one seems to know the answer to the latter question.'

With the first four articles identifying and problematizing core symptoms of how research and knowledge production is being governed, the final piece of this issue discusses one possible strategy for rupture or circumvention. Against the backdrop of previous interventions, Walter Mignolo discerns further layers of the fabrication of knowledge and traces the dominance of certain languages as mediums *par excellence* of both thinking and writing to its imperial legacy – English, French, Spanish etcetera. According to Mignolo, this legacy is witnessed in, for instance, the current hierarchies between publishing languages (journals in English tend to be higher ranked than journals in Russian or Thai) as well as in relation to the theories we teach and draw upon (say European philosophers from Aristotle to Foucault; from Plato to Marx). Against this background, Mignolo encourages us to be disobedient by regarding knowledge as geo-politically situated within given contexts, where the power balance that straddles different parts of the world influences whether a certain view of knowledge is ascribed global reach or remains 'local' or 'domestic'. As an example, Mignolo points out how theories produced by Western philosophers – Foucault, Bourdieu, Derrida, to name a few – travel around the globe; contrastively, the presence of Asians, South Americans or Africans tend to be slim to none within the western academia. Challenging the hegemony of Western cultural institutions more broadly – including the universities, publishing companies and the entire knowledge-base produced from within the modern European languages – Mignolo launches another option, a *decolonial* one, where the

knowledges of those who have been marginalized and gaggled by European macro-narratives are brought to the fore.

The journal Confero: Essays on Education, Philosophy and Politics

Having summarised the themes of the inaugural issue of *Confero* above, we want to briefly include a few notes on the vision of this new scientific platform. This journal came to life as a collective endeavour by a group of Swedish doctoral students whom all, albeit originating from different disciplinary backgrounds, were at unease with the emerging regime of the scientific economy of publications and citations as well as the templates of mass article-production.

Confero aims to provide essays in the field of education that do not stay faithful to the hegemonic format of a 'scientific article'. Often very narrow in scope, most scientific journals enforce 'economic' modes of expressions, such as employing an alliance-signalling argot, inserting a fast, limited and recycled review of previous research, and twisting the overarching line of argumentation very modestly. Consequently, *Confero* challenges the mainstream reliance on form and structure to guarantee quality in social scientific writing and provides a new space for essayistic writing in the area of education. For us, high academic quality requires consistency and persuasiveness, rich and thick descriptions and reflexivity. By focusing primarily on essays related to education broadly defined, we hope to receive contributions that are not only stringent and systematic, but also beautiful, esoteric and profound.

The issues and problems related to the emerging economy of publications and citations, that are the theme of this first issue, are scrutinized from different perspectives both in terms of method and theory. Apart from drawing attention to the on-going transformation of scientific publishing, the more long-term aim of *Confero* is to provide a space for critical inquiries at the crossroads between education, philosophy and politics. Launching this journal, we hope that the pluralism evident in the first issue can signal a broad enough space for scholars to feel welcomed to submit essays to *Confero*. By bringing together social scientific research that often is kept apart – by that very publication system that this issue has taken as its primary focal-point to scrutinize – we wish to simulate academic debate as well as to challenge the current state of academic affairs.

Confero will be a peer-reviewed open access journal, available for free to people engaged in social science research as well as a wider intellectual public. To be accepted for publication, the essay can be written from a wide range of theoretical perspectives and academic traditions. We particularly welcome a broad range of empirical sources used to explore the issue or phenomenon at hand: unconventional sources such as art works, pictures, movies as well as conventional empirical material like interviews, ethnographies or statistics.[11] We hope you will enjoy the collection of papers in this inaugural issue and we look forward to your future contributions – be it as

[11] Although web technologies have made the integration of sounds, images, text, and pictorial animations possible, mainstream scientific publishing has been failing to leverage such possibilities for research communication. *Confero* expects this dominant use of text in research dissemination to shift gradually, and hopes to be at the forefront of this development.

author, reviewer or reader. It is with great excitement that we hereby launch the first issue of *Confero*.

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