Opinion: On academia and sea elephants

The social benefits expected from academia are generally identified as belonging to three broad categories: research, education and contribution to wider society. Universities and higher education institutions are meant to operate within these fields. However, evaluating the current state of academia according to these criteria reveals a somewhat disturbing phenomenon. It seems that an increased pressure to produce peer-reviewed articles creates an unbalanced emphasis on the research criterion at the expense of the other two. More fatally, the pressure to produce articles has turned academia into a rat race; the fundamental structure of academic behaviour has been changed, resulting in a self-defeating and counter-productive pattern.

Let us elaborate this last point: When applying for a position, the chances of being hired do not just depend on your absolute level of publications, but on how much you have published relative to your competitors. Of course, job applications mention other criteria such as the ability to teach, the ability to raise external funds and sometimes other fluency conditions like personality traits, and so forth. But, in the end, it is almost exclusively how much you produce in comparison with people around you that counts. The person involved in writing articles in competition faces a strong incentive to publish, and therefore everyone raises the standards for all.

The behaviour of male sea elephants seems to be analogous: The bigger a male is, the higher his chances of beating his opponents during fights and, thus, gaining access to the females. If you introduce an addition to the competition he has reached a level where males often suffocate females during the reproductive act due to their excessive dimensions.1 If you were to define one criterion to maximise the reproductive performance of males, a self-defeating dynamic is clearly at work here.

We should remind ourselves that to ‘publish more’ is not an intrinsic good. First, to be useful a publication should bring forth greater productivity. Therefore, academics are pressured to publish, more than they tend to publish everything. Most of us have received similar advice from an older colleague: ‘If you want to publish, publish everything!’ Consequently, the standard volume of published work is rising for everyone, and everything else being equal, the quality of everyone’s publications must be going down.

Secondly, it is a banal point, but someone should read it: If not, there is no advantage at all to be had. Again, the more academics that publish, the less they pay attention to each other’s work, for the simple reason that they won’t have the time to read other people’s stuff. The picture is quite absurd. The average number of readers per academic article varies from below 1 (it is an average to a handful of people. A common joke among academics is to say that, on average, four people read an article: the two anonymous referees, the author herself and her mother.

More seriously, why put such an emphasis on publications if so few people actually access the knowledge? It is particularly worrying if we consider the fact that the majority of innovation flows from our ability to produce new ideas that will be discussed by peers. Academia has always been a community of ideas based on the confrontation of arguments and enquires. It has been this way because this kind of human interaction produces the most benefits. But, in reality, academia appears more like a rat race. The point here is that it has become impossible to read everything of value – or just a reasonable selection of it – that is published in each of our fields. The chance is high that we will lose track of some important contributions, new developments and occasions to produce better research. Moreover, in order to publish we have to do something, we are forced into higher degrees of specialisation. Consequently, we find ourselves locked in highly specific, tall and narrow ivory towers, with very little knowledge about the forest of ivory towers surrounding us.

If we take the question to another level, the problem is that publications are only one kind of social benefit that a society can expect from its higher education. Colleges and universities also have an educational purpose. They are supposed to offer valuable courses and consistent pedagogical follow-up. If we were completely rational, we would be forced to see teaching as a burden, time wasted for our research and publications. In Denmark where we work, the most efficient researchers are usually relieved of their teaching duties and this ‘burden’ then falls largely on the shoulders of younger researchers, who actually need more time for their own research and cannot provide the quality of teaching normally associated with well-established professors. Moreover, while specialisation might be productive in the natural sciences (though there are good reasons to doubt this as well), specialisation within the humanities makes fertile points of contact between individual scholars and society even harder to achieve.

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Two further remarks: First of all, it should be recognised that we are all responsible for this situation. By trying to stand out in the crowd, we are giving the requirements for every- one else. It resembles what is known in game theory as the ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ or social coordination problem. What is rational to do according to immediate self-interest is collectively self-defeating; it is a so-called ‘smart for one, dumb for all’ logic. However, what can be done? One solution raised by, among others, Alain de Botton consists of paying less attention to our relative positions in the publications pecking order.2 But the problem is that standing apart from the competition almost certainly means giving up the chance for a significant academic position. In the existing system it does not seem to be a viable option. It simply clashes with the structure of incentives that academics face— to publish more than their competitors.

Other solutions include restricting the amount of working hours (which can be seen as a justification for incremental taxes on extra hours worked) in a society can expect from its higher education. Colleges and universities also have an educational purpose. They are supposed to offer valuable courses and consistent pedagogical follow-up. If we were completely rational, we would be forced to see teaching as a burden, time wasted for our research and publications. In Denmark where we work, the most efficient researchers are usually relieved of their teaching duties and this ‘burden’ then falls largely on the shoulders of younger researchers, who actually need more time for their own research and cannot provide the quality of teaching normally associated with well-established professors. Moreover, while specialisation might be productive in the natural sciences (though there are good reasons to doubt this as well), specialisation within the humanities makes fertile points of contact between individual scholars and society even harder to achieve.

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