On Academia and Sea Elephants

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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.

When applying for a position, the chances of being hired do not just depend on your absolute level of publications, but also on how much you have published relative to your competitors. 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 also 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 fuzzy conditions like personality traits, and so forth. But, in the end, it is almost exclusively how much you produce in comparison with your peers that decides whether you will be involved in the competition. The 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 females. In the same way, academics are pressured to publish, the more they tend to publish everything. Most of us have received similar advice from an older colleague: ‘no matter what, just 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 they 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% (as an average) to a handful of people. A common joke among academics is to say that, on average, four people read each article: the anonymous referee, 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 a lot of something, we are forced into ever 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 own 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. Thus, we actually spend more time for their own research and cannot provide the quality of teaching normally associated with well-established professors.

Moreover, while specialists 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 ever harder to achieve.

In terms of the third social benefit—contribution to wider society—we are seeing a decrease of popular articles, contributing to social debates, organising conferences open to a wider public, since these activities will not help us to reach a higher position in our competitive system. As a result, society is losing some of its richness and the social benefit produced by universities is declining. In sum, the gap is increasing between researchers in their ivory towers and the rest of society. Without advocating for the return of the intellectual engagers of the last century, it is still plausible to find respectable academics in the humanities and social sciences are largely absent from the public scene.

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