

Survival strategies of economists and political scientists in contemporary academia

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Introduction

“Publish or Perish” have been the mantra for researchers in decades. The notion of the need to publish is essential in academia for communicating your research. Not just of altruistic Mertonian reasons of building and expanding the world of knowledge, but also of more personal reasons. Thus, publications are crucial for researchers’ careers, since it is instrumental in gaining recognition and building a reputation. This recognition and reputation are then used when applying for funding, promotions or jobs. With the world of metrics, this recognition has been quantified intensively, so assessments often start with a quantitative measurement of this reputation.

Numerous national agencies and governments have implemented national bibliometric performance systems to evaluate their universities performance and allocate funds (Linda Butler, 2007; Krog Lind, 2019; Sivertsen, 2018), which quickly tickles down to the individual researchers (Aagaard, 2015). Thus, several studies demonstrate that the usage of these bibliometric performance systems influence how researchers publish, especially in the social sciences and the humanities (e.g. L. Butler, 2003; Hammarfelt & de Rijcke, 2015; Moed, 2008). These branches typically have a more heterogeneous publishing pattern than the sciences (Hicks, 2005; Ossenblok, Engels, & Sivertsen, 2012). Moreover, social scientists more frequently publish book chapters and books, and often in a national language. Furthermore, studies of the sciences show how the extensive use of performance indicators changes how researchers think about and plan their research (Müller & de Rijcke, 2017; Rushforth & de Rijcke, 2015).

This paper uses a qualitative case study to explore how the great pressure to publishing according to national bibliometric performance system influence Danish economists and political scientists. Thus, the paper focuses on what strategies researchers adapt to “survive” in a publish-or-perish world, especially regarding their collaboration and publishing behavior.

Method:

The qualitative study consists of data from 17 in-depth interviews with nine economists and eight political scientists from the same university in Denmark. The interviews occurred in the period from August to September 2017, except for one pilot interview with a political scientist conducted in June 2017. The participants were eleven male and six female researchers at different stages in their career, who all have co-authored at least one publication. The researchers have between 3-47 years of experience in research. The interviews focus on different aspects of research collaboration, co-authorship and reward systems, and had a duration between 1-3.5 hours. The study uses thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017) to identify themes and patterns in the

interviews. This paper focuses on themes related to the impact of publish-or-perish on different aspects of the co-authoring and publishing process.

Co-authorship and publishing

During the interviews and subsequent analysis, it became evident that most of the social scientists experience a pressure to publish, and many referred to the mantra “*Publish or Perish*”. Thus, the career aspects of publishing are always present, especially among the junior researchers and associate professors. They know that to succeed in academia, they must be perpetual in their publishing, and the method is co-authoring, especially, because they experience that the bar for continuing in academia is higher: “*So it is more (articles) than earlier, it is. And it is more, than five years ago*” (Associate Professor, political scientist).

This means that the competition for advancing is becoming exponentially tougher and changing researchers’ motivation to collaborate. As one postdoc stated “*(...) (collaboration) also benefits your career because your research output simply increases. There is also a measure of risk spreading involved, because if you increase the number of articles (...) it does not matter as much when something goes wrong*” (Postdoc, economist). This illustrates how the publish-or-perish mantra dominating all academic fields gives social scientists incentives to collaborate because the success of their career depends on how strong and long their publication lists are. If researchers spread their energy and have stocks in multiple publications and research projects instead of betting on a single publication, they limit the risk of having a zero-publishing period, achieve a longer publication list and receive more exposure. As one associate professor stated: “*you can’t just sit and publish all your articles by yourself, then you will never be on your way*” (Associate Professor, political scientist).

The researchers focus on publish more, and most emphasize a need to publish according to the journal and publishers ranking lists. Especially the younger researchers refer to the different rankings and indicators. The researchers reflected over how the bibliometric performance systems influence their publishing and collaborating behavior “*[The reward for publishing] sends some signals, and it has clearly brought a cultural change in how much people collaborate and how much to publish, and where you publish and etc.....*” (Associate Professor, political scientist). Furthermore, some of the economists’ state that “*books have a low value here*”. The picture is more blurred among the political scientists, but they still focus on the importance of “*having the articles*”.

Conclusion:

The paper shows how social scientists experience a great pressure to publish more and more. The researchers are clearly focused on the possibility of optimizing their productivity by collaborating and by writing articles instead of books, so they prevent the dreaded risk of becoming a “zero-researcher¹”.

¹ someone without a publication productivity for a longer period

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