Recalling quality in scholarly publications

Anastássios Perdicoúlis
Assistant Professor, ECT, UTAD (http://www.tasso.utad.pt)
Senior Researcher, CITTA, FEUP (http://www.fe.up.pt/~tasso)
Visiting Researcher, Oxford Institute for Sustainable Development, OBU, UK

Nuno Miguel Cordeiro Cristelo
Assistant Professor, ECT, UTAD
Researcher, CQVR, UTAD (http://cqvr.purpleprofile.pt)

Ana Cristina Briga de Sá
Assistant Professor, ECT, UTAD
Researcher, C-MADE, UBI (https://www.ubi.pt/entidade/C-MADE)

Abstract
Defending the quality of scholarly publications strengthens the academic fabric, but requires a disengagement from the infatuation with metrics that disorientates from the academic cause.

1 Introduction

Whether publicly or privately funded (Perdicoúlis, 2014b, 2018b), the academic community has been pursuing knowledge1 and scholarship2 through formal education and systematic investigation3 since its ancient Athenian inception, through to its medieval European revival, and up to its modern embodiment (Perdicoúlis, 2018c). This righteous cause stands as a hallmark of quality, with the added onus of credibility for the human civilisation (Perdicoúlis, 2015b). However, owing to an unexpected twist4, academia currently has an infatuation with the popularity5 of publications6 to the detriment of quality which, in the best of cases, is purported by proxies (Perdicoúlis, 2013a).

The ‘public science paradox’ (Perdicoúlis, 2018a) is capable of alerting to the traded values, although quality is still sought in ‘organic’ or ‘local’ (i.e. low-intensity, fit-for-purpose) academic endeavours (Perdicoúlis, 2014c). By and large, decades of persistent side-focussing have managed to disorientate generations of scientists, so a ‘resistance’ question begs to be asked: what stands behind high-quality scholarly publications?

1 Awareness through a ‘hands-on’ experience, including data, information, and understanding (Perdicoúlis, 2013b).
2 i.e. learning at a high level, with communication characterised by ‘scientific rigour’ (Perdicoúlis, 2012b, 2014a).
3 This is commonly known as ‘research’, and is founded on trustworthy procedures (Perdicoúlis, 2014b,d, 2015b).
4 Credits to E. Garfield’s inoffensive discovery followed up by a successful business venture (Perdicoúlis, 2015a).
5 It is known from the wider market that popularity does not (necessarily) indicate quality (Perdicoúlis, 2013a).
6 Popularity is indicated by citations, which currently have the value of an academic currency (Perdicoúlis, 2012a).
2 Attitude and determination

Academic endeavours with the intent to prepare high-quality publications require two parts: (a) a long-term, cumulative personal investment of the participants, summarised as expertise and/or experience, and (b) a practical determination for the particular endeavour, evidenced in the effort the participants are effectively willing to dedicate — Figure 1.

Figure 1 The quality of scholarly publications depends so much on practical determination as on long-term investment.

The cumulative and operational parts interact and — in the case of sincere involvement, driven by a constructive attitude — create a rewarding, enriching, and empowering situation for the participants thanks to three reinforcing feedback loops:

- \( R_1 \) (overall maturity) scholarly competence/ expertise \( \Rightarrow \) writing/ editing experience;
- \( R_2 \) (writing maturity) care in writing (incl. revisions) \( \Rightarrow \) writing/ editing experience;
- \( R_3 \) (subject matter maturity) scholarly care \( \Rightarrow \) scholarly competence/ expertise.

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7 i.e. specialisation, knowledge in the subject matter.
8 i.e. involvement, practical contact.
3 Exploration

By virtue of its central position (Figure 1), the attitude \((X_0)\) of the participants is a ‘primary condition’ for the conduct of the academic system, with direct results on practical matters and ramifications towards the long-term investment. The best-case scenario implies that the properly ‘primed’
reinforcing loops of Figure 1 are motivated by a constructive attitude \((X_0)\) and accompanied by corresponding hard work \((X_1-X_3)\), and thus advance everyone and everything towards ‘maturity’ — in other words, high quality.

On the contrary, a less-favourable scenario may emerge if any of the system components is neglected or downplayed, in which case the reinforced development of the loops tends to ‘decadence’ — a situation that is unpleasant and embarrassing for the participants and their institutions, a setback for science, and difficult to revert. An attitude of negligence or indifference would have a significant responsibility in such a downfall, but even a constructive attitude alone would not be enough to revert the overall trend of a vitiated system.

4 Challenges

Re-investing in quality is a system-wide undertaking: it is a much larger task than injecting money into R&D projects, educational institutes, or hiring ‘metrics-minded’ professors for research centres. Quality is a cultural construct (Perdicoúlis, 2013c), and as such it is required of every participant of the system, deep in their minds — e.g. knowledge, consciousness, and conviction about the academic mission, as well as sincerity in their motives and actions.

Resisting the trends of ephemeral harvesting (‘scientific production’) and the accompanying mindset of proxies of quality is a good start; broader education of the academics — e.g. history and evolution of the profession — is a global ‘elevator’ of the situation; a good attitude is a catalyst; and a stable financial model (Perdicoúlis, 2018b) is necessary to allow scientists the peace of mind to prepare for the long-term investment, building their competences and experience. The rest is hard work — albeit rather enjoyable.

References


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9 e.g. through the long process of learning and self-investment.
10 This is largely due to the nature of reinforcing (or ‘positive’) feedback loops (Sterman, 2000, § 8.2).
11 Technically, these are known as ‘leverage’ points (Meadows, 1999).