

Abstract

This article considers the causes and consequences of the increasing role of the “publish or perish” principle in modern academic systems. In particular, it discusses how various types of universities interpret this principle and why its causes differ across academic systems.

Publish or Perish

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In recent decades, pressure to publish—the “publish or perish” principle—has become a signature feature of academic life. What does this principle mean and why it is considered harmful and destructive by the academic profession?

At top research universities and teaching institutions alike, faculty constantly complain about the increase of formal requirements and informal expectations about their productivity, for their academic careers, promotion, and academic well-being.

However, these complaints are distinct across universities and countries. In elite US universities, the stakes of accessing positions for life are getting higher and tenure expectations now require faculty to publish in a small number of top quality journals. Meanwhile, in many other institutions, “publish or perish” is associated with a growing pressure to publish *more*, with little respect to quality and impact. For a broad part of the academic profession, the signal that quantity is more important than quality in academic publishing is taking over.

This trend is harmful for the academic profession in general and for the individual academic in particular. With its ever-increasing loads and a growing student body, teaching is seen by many as inferior with respect to research. Next, as demand stimulates supply, mushrooming journals with no reputation and read by no one are now addressing this sole purpose—serving authors who need to report on published output. The pressure to publish causes atomization and individualization within the academic community: faculty tend to spend less time and effort on the provision of academic service, such as work in academic committees or faculty mentoring, shifting their priorities toward publishable output and external grants (which are also important for promotion and require publications, both to apply and as output). Finally, from their very first steps in their academic careers, young scholars may learn that the ultimate goal of

what they are doing is not to search for the truth, but to publish, as an end in itself. This may profoundly affect their academic morale, quality standards, and research practices.

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Massification

Why this growing pressure on publishing in academia? There seem to be different reasons, depending on whether academic systems are market oriented or state controlled.

In market-oriented systems, massification is a key factor because it triggers several processes associated with publication pressure. The share of short-term contracts is growing and the number of academics without tenure prospects is increasing. To extend their contracts, they have to prove their productivity during each contract period—often, in a short-term perspective. As a result of short-term contracts and ensuing insecurity, faculty may opt to publish in a continuous flow, sometimes “faster” rather than “better.”

Moreover, there is an increasing demand for accountability in massified higher education systems: universities are required to report to society that they spend public funding for the common good. Publications (and in the first place, their aggregate numbers) seem to be a transparent indicator of this impact on society.

Bureaucracy

Systems where the role of government prevails provide another imperative to “publish or perish.” Government agencies, ministries, and other bodies want to measure the success of higher education institutions, using preferably formal, easy-to-estimate, and easy-to-compare indicators, with minimum recourse to expert opinion. As a measure of how well a university functions, publication output is imperfect and rather limited, but measuring the quality of teaching is even harder. Since external bodies rely on formal indicators, quantity tends to play a more important role than quality. As formal rules and indicators can be manipulated, we see alarming signals of such manipulations in some countries where governments initiate, and financially support, initiatives to stimulate excellence. In a broader context, one can see that the academic profession, as an object of measurement, adjusts to the instruments of such measurements and that this adjustment profoundly affects individual researchers and institutional research practices and policies.

Other Sources of Pressure

In both systems—market-oriented or government-controlled—the global ranking race creates substantial publication pressure on national institutions. The growing “ranking fever” increases the focus on publications, as they are a key indicator. The positions of universities in ranking lists depend on publications—with institutions often caring more about their aggregate quantity, not about quality. Such pressure pushes researchers to not only compromise on quality, but sometimes also to seek to publish in fields with higher impact factors and other formal credentials, adjusting their research topics and publication strategies to attain better prospects of being published and better ranking credentials.

This gets even worse in situations in which the “publish or perish” imperative comes “on top of everything else” and requires a publication effort also from faculty who are not supposed to do research—only to teach. Many teaching institutions nowadays have ambitions to become research institutions, or are forced by their governments to strengthen their research component.

Conclusion

In broad terms, the “publish or perish” principle is often associated with a phenomenon of prevalence of nonacademic control over the academic profession. While we know why it happens and how harmful the consequences are, the question of what should be done to stop this pressure is still open. What we can say for sure is that many articles will be published on this topic. ▲

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