

THOSE INCONSPICUOUS JOURNALS: ARE THEY SCHOLARLY PUBLICATIONS?

Te czasopisma niepozorne: czy to w ogóle są publikacje naukowe?

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A – przygotowanie projektu badania | study design, B – zbieranie danych | data collection, C – analiza statystyczna | statistical analysis, D – interpretacja danych | data interpretation, E – przygotowanie maszynopisu | manuscript preparation, F – opracowanie piśmiennictwa | literature search, G – pozyskanie funduszy | funds collection

SUMMARY

We see them in libraries, and we sense the differences between them and highly-cited literature. We know that many authors' ambition is to have a paper published in one of them. What is their role in the circulation of scientific findings? The aim of the study is to define, describe and evaluate the possible effects of "inconspicuous journals" (monographs, conference proceedings and other low-rated publications) on the domain of scientific resources and the organization of knowledge. Material and methods are casual but based on everyday observations of a librarian and publisher. The publications in question are perceived as a disaster by critics of the publishing scene and scholarly communication, but they

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are treated seriously by both publishers and the state quality-assurance system. They are apparently in the queue for the points for citations, and while there is not much hope for them in this field, they also seem to make a scene on their own. They may be useful for scholars who are not mature enough to run for publishing in IF journals, and they provide a good field for local and regional scientific communities to strengthen their potential and communication patterns. To sum up, inconspicuous works have their own share in the world of knowledge. They perhaps should not multiply, but there is no reason to suppress them for not providing "points" for their publishers.

STRESZCZENIE

Widzimy je w bibliotekach, a różnica między nimi i czasopismami wysoko cytowanymi jest intuicyjna. Wiemy, że ambicją wielu autorów jest zamieszczenie w którymś z nich publikacji. Ale jaka jest ich rola w obiegu twierdzeń naukowych? Celem pracy jest zdefiniowanie, opisanie i ocena możliwych skutków funkcjonowania „niepozornych czasopism” (a także monografii, zbiorów konferencyjnych i innych publikacji uważanych za drugorzędne) w obszarze zasobów nauki oraz organizacji wiedzy. Materiał i metody to uogólnienie codziennych doświadczeń bibliotekarza i wydawcy. Publikacje, o których mowa, są przez krytyków i analityków życia akademickiego i komunikacji naukowej uważane za katastrofę. A jednak wydawcy

Słowa kluczowe: artykuły rzadko cytowane, inflacja w publikacji, środowiska naukowe, strategie publikowania

i państwowy system zapewnienia jakości w szkolnictwie wyższym traktują je poważnie. Widać, że dopiero pracują na swoje punkty, a rokowania w tym zakresie są raczej niepomysłne. Mają jednak własne nisze. Są na przykład niezbędne uczonym, którzy nie dojrżeli jeszcze do publikowania w czasopiśmie z IF, i wspierają lokalne oraz regionalne społeczności naukowe, tak by zyskały one świadomość swojego potencjału i praktyk komunikacyjnych. A zatem prace niepozorne mają swój udział w świecie wiedzy. Nie chcielibyśmy, żeby zwiększał się on procentowo, ale nie powinno się ich poddawać swoistym represjom za to, że nie dostarczają punktów wydawcom.

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High cited, low-cited

We are all for science, because some three centuries ago, or earlier, we came to a belief that it is a tool not only to salvation, but also to progress, wealth, and, perhaps, happiness. With such roles attached to it, however, it is obvious that scientific research, communities and institutions will be parts of a wider social context. This context will unavoidably contain the mechanisms, whose impact on the results of the research will be dubious. Moreover, this context will also produce mythologies, whose impact may be beneficial or harmful.

Science is wrapped in popular culture, and popular culture is restless. It certainly will not let 'scientists fall asleep in their ivory towers'! While science, most generally and briefly, is actually a critical process leading to a temporary and provisional unanimity [1], it is frequently confused with a discovery, invention, and implementation. It is also widely agreed that scientific endeavour produces publications. A popular belief affirms that a scientific publication is a fat book from which students have to learn. But, the spirit of competition, taken over from the world of inventors and discoverers, to even more extent than the very practice of science, invites another format, namely, a journal article.

Articles are difficult to compare, but their citation crops are not. The migration of a scientific discourse from the resources of printed paper to a digital format has created the industry of quick comparison. The citation count is becoming a prism, through which a research is nationally and globally perceived and evaluated. This measurement is the most convenient foundation for the science policy. The magic box will tell you, which research is better, because it is capable of counting citations generated by its documentary output. We, the people of science and policy makers along with the general public, seem to be abandoning the reflection on the cognitive value of the research. We do not follow its areas of concentration, like schools. We neglect to identify, where authority lies and where the mainstream is, because we no longer have the will to exercise and tools to deploy. We just watch citations as a statistical phenomena. The curves drawn by the automata will tell us the truth. And thus, we support the endless game in which authors are trapped. There are low-cited journals, and they are eager to accept your paper, and there are high cited journals, which are not. You have to decide which is your target type. Inside the low-cited environment you will not win much, but you will, at least, remain in business. The high cited milieu is difficult to get inside, but once you do, a powerful machine starts operating towards your benefits.

Personal strategies of academic authors are more or less focused to find an optimal distribution of the titles to which you submit your papers. As in financial operations, there is a risk continuum with the no-risk and no-gain end, and the maximum risk and maximum-chance end. You can establish yourself as an acknowledged author with a few publications, for which you will wait for years, and which will take other years to crop any citations. Or you can perish with your numerous easily achieved publications, which will receive no cites.

Low-cited, but numerous

Thus, scientific publishing becomes an exercise on risk management. It has to be admitted, that the usage of h-index for authors' evaluation and the comparison supports a well-balanced strategy, avoiding both ends of the continuum. 'An academic cannot have a high h-index without publishing a substantial number of papers' [2]. In fact, then, we never aim at writing one paper like Albert Einstein's on the electrodynamics of moving bodies [3] (in fact, there were three other groundbreaking papers published by Einstein in his *Annus Mirabilis* in 1905). We always need more publications to get at least h-index equal 2. And, the higher the expected index, the more publications we will need. And more publications means more journals today. It is unlikely for an Einstein of the 21st century (mind the unlikelihood of the occurrence of such an Einstein) who would dare to submit four papers in one year to some modern 'Annalen der Physik'. The diversification of the sources is a common wisdom of the scientists as authors. And with the diversification, the lower-impact journals enter the scene.

They are always a temptation and very often a wise choice of authors who cannot be sure that they have the most important truth to share and those who believe in the value of the truth, but not so much as in the responsiveness of their communities. This single pressure put on the authors saves the efforts of publishers and librarians to make scientific ideas circulate (and unanimity take ground) which would be enough for a multiplication of journal titles.

So how many journal titles do we have today? 40,000? Or more? Or what is the difference, if we have two thousand less? And thus, absurd publishing [4] is expanding.

With some 3.5 thousand titles, Poland is a world power with 154,016 papers published in the years of 2001- 2011. According to Thomson Reuters, we occupy the position number 20. But with 6.73 citations per paper, we are far from the top twenty, although it is substantially higher than some other world output leaders, namely, China (PR), India, Russia, Brazil and Taiwan. How far? Well, it is Ireland with 11.67 cites per paper (and only 45,774 papers) listed as the number 20 in the citation per paper table, with such small and large publishers as Switzerland, the Netherlands and the USA as the obvious leaders (above 16) [5]. The nature of the crisis, which we are aggravating in Poland (but not so substantially as for instance in BRIC countries) is the growing empty body of publications. The knowledge, which is emerging and sharable but not really useful. But, it is a very general statement, and indeed a rough estimation. For better understanding of the phenomenon, we can continue with the statistics. This will certainly lead to the discovery of some essential differences in the performance of some specific disciplinary segments. For the time being, however, we would suggest a more general look. First of all, how do we perceive these non-IF journals? Are they, by comparison to pulp fiction, pulp science or science paperbacks? Not really, as they may be cheap, but they do not have a clearly specified auditorium. Or perhaps some do? Are these



just mediocre readers? Not really, it is rather mediocre authors who can be at stake. But the more important feature is that they are not a 'must' for reading, they are a must for records and statistics. Are those inconspicuous journals scholarly publications?

We see them in libraries. Their main source of acquisition is a legal deposit and library exchange programmes, not subscription. They are, or are not, indexed in some bibliographies excluding the prestigious ones. They are seldom carefully edited as they contain errors. Their editors seldom step forward with editorials. And while they are not really poor publications (no poor publications in Poland any more), they lack some look of smartness and modernity in comparison to most quality publications. Their layout is old-fashioned and uninventive, and not really costly. The basic thing here is that these inconspicuous works do not do very well with any auditorium, and we hardly receive any complaints from patrons if they suddenly disappear from our shelves, web sites, and repositories. But, perhaps, they have some appeal, which we are not really aware of, some value, other than just offering publishing prospects to low-aiming scholars, or, more precisely, offer publishing prospects to any scholars, including those high-aiming, whenever they think they need more papers in circulation to shape their crop of citations correctly.

Before we try to understand them, however, we are just scared of those Dead Scrolls, and we are afraid that many of them will never bring a citation to their authors. But does it affect all of them?

Looking on the contents

Do we remember what Dr. Els Van Nood had read, before she tried out her inventive methods of fecal microbiota transplantation? [6] It was an article published in "Surgery" in 1958 [7]. Yes, "Surgery" is and was a reputable journal those days, subscribed to by hundreds of libraries in the USA. And what, if it was not the case? And anyway, how did Van Nood come to read just this paper? And in what journal was the work of Gregor Mendel published? In no journal, it seems, but in a book titled

Versuche über Pflanzenhybriden: Zwee Abhandlungen (1865, 1869). But the problem is that if Mendel had not contributed to some academic journal in Moravia, Bohemia or even to one of those of the Empire-wide impact, it might have fallen into oblivion deeper than his book. And how about the writings of Alexander Luria (1902-1977)?

We know about the relatively late, yet, profound impact of his books, some of which were just translated into English and, thus, became known to Western neuropsychologists.

There certainly are some Luria scholars, who study his dispersed papers, like those at A. R. Luria Archive at Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, University of California, San Diego [8]. Many articles are in Russian only. They are important for the history of ideas and, perhaps, for the Soviet studies, but definitely they might have been skipped by the scholars like the late Oliver Sachs', who drew upon Luria's main discov-

eries and theories. If we explore the issue deeper, we may come to the conclusion, that works which inspired top scientists were, on occasions, dug out from older or not really mainstream sources. It does not have to happen frequently to make us suspect that we never know the value of an issue of a journal (or a book). We do not know it at the moment of publication, because it is too early to draw anybody's attention, and we do not know it later, because the attention might be permanently disturbed. We do believe, that Open Access and modern bibliographic tools make a chance for the publications' escape very small. But it will grow with the number of periodicals, because not the tools, but human capacity to tap them will bring limitations to the reception of textual information. In other words, we may have just passed the 'best time' to be fully informed, and with valuable contents scattered among more and more titles, the chances to discover and cite something that really supports or falsifies our findings, are statistically decreasing.

On ethnography of the low-cited journal

We should also consider some other possible dimensions of low-cited periodicals. Lower level may be necessary for the upper level to come into being. It provides a field not only for the beginners, but also for those tied up with some commitment to publish in this very journal because of a team solidarity, or perhaps some human relation belonging to a culture or the institution, or because of the lack of time of an author to consider a better medium. Global scientific ideas might have originated in local scientific environment, or in the realm of non-IF journals. This is an unquoted research that must have created a 'national' (i.e. local) body of publications in the pre-global era. It certainly repeated much of the work conducted elsewhere, but there is no way to prove that all the findings of international importance would percolate to the local (unknown outside of a country) academic textbooks, if not described in the second-rated periodicals. So it is not only the case of genius Luria exporting (or not) his research to the global research community, it is the case of many 'importing' authors, who read rare great books or outstanding articles in foreign languages and made their contents be known to thousands of ordinary students. We just do not know much about the networks of research information and flow of ideas in the times preceding the digital revolution. And there is more to it. Let us look at a young, very active professor of philosophy, a prolific writer named Bogdan Pilski. No, there is no such entry in any finding tool, but we can find Pilski or perhaps several Pilskis when we look at the philosophy departments in Poland. He is employed by one of many private universities, and he is very active in the Visegrád Countries Group, especially Poland and Slovakia. His h-index is 2, which is a low result, but not a disaster. Many older humanist scholars have the same result, but opposite to them, he can hope that his citations will cumulate over years. When browsing his publications, we might admit that they are not too exciting, but there is no scholarly critique now in the region, and Professor Pilski will not be destroyed

by unfavourable reviewers. Yes, he is interested in safe topics, but never mind, not only him. And these topics will, in the end, also draw somebody's attention. He publishes mostly in journals which you basically do not read, but you certainly have them in your library. There are many journals like these, predominantly, in social science, humanities, philosophy and technology which are widely represented in collections due to extensive exchange programmes and a generous legal deposit law.

Bogdan Pilski's views on any philosophical problem are not too clear, but he does not have to be taken as fully predictable. He can find some followers, and if it is the ostentatiously Christian version of philosophy, which is becoming trendy in Poland, he has probably done it already. He can improve his style, erudition and creative freedom. And, last but not least, his experience keeps cumulating, and it must be affecting, to some extent, his expertise. He will become an authority on this or that, and seek objective evaluation. Some day we will be happy to identify him as a distinguished scholar.

Do such people also happen in mathematics, physics or medicine? We would not be eager to admit it, stressing solid quality criteria and objective reviews dominating in these areas. But secondary research and secondary academic writing is overwhelming, and will find its niches here and there, if not today, then tomorrow.

A common sense finding is that Pilski is a political scientist even more often than a philosopher as in this area, research findings generally follow opinions present in media. For a lay observer, you do not have to master any methodology to practise political science; you write what you hear around. Euro would be a perfect currency in Poland, but there are serious contraindications, too.

The peace process in Ukraine depends on how the Minsk Agreement will be observed and fulfilled. The Labour Party may soon take over in the United Kingdom. It, however, depends on scheduling and results of the poll. And so on. But let us stress that some of the work in political science, sociology and economics is quite well cited, because it pertains to current issues and points to the areas with some political flavour, or which make authors more attractive in the society. As publishers and librarians, we are supposed to value it, because we do not have a better quality criterion than a chain of citations. And the more we find this criterion weak and obscure, the more we have to agree, that any research or opinion paper can have its right to a long life, during which its thesis can mature like wine.

Conclusions

We need more study on those inconspicuous little journals. If they are not scholarly literature, we need a serious reflection on what they are. If they are, our – and our patrons' – the understanding of scholarship has taken a serious blow. In any case, valid scientific ideas can be found anywhere, and we have to become – or remain – ready to detect them in all the genres and formats incident to modern communication.

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