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Journal Self-Citation IX: The Power of the Unspoken in Journal Referencing

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Abstract:

Publication of articles in so called "reputed" journals and achieving high citation counts for the publications are becoming increasingly important in establishing the scientific achievements of individual scholars and institutions. Given that a journal's reputation is based predominantly on the extent to which its articles are cited, some editors, reviewers, and journal publishers tend to overtly request references to their articles or journals. This is justifiably found unethical by many of us. However, we shall argue that such explicit requests for referencing is only the tip of the iceberg. There is a widespread, covert understanding among potential authors that unless they cite work of editors and/or have references to the journal where one is submitting a manuscript, the probability of getting the paper accepted for publication may suffer. This consideration is a much more powerful influence than the overt requests some may have experienced as authors. Overt, as well as covert, activities aimed at bumping up individual and journal citations is a dysfunctional result of an increasingly competitive scholarly environment, where the value of success is high, and failure is a very unpleasant option. In the short run, making the community aware of dysfunctional behaviors with respect to citations might help counteract the most blatant exertion of power. However, addressing the more covert use of power requires a more in depth look at ourselves and the way we conduct and assess scholarship. In the long run, the IS field may even need to seriously assess the extent to which our research efforts serve standards primarily internal to our field (similar to rites of other tribes) rather than delivering value to society.

Keywords: journal referencing, covert influence, citations, power influencing citations, research practices

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I. INTRODUCTION

The starting point for this paper is the acknowledgement that, irrespective of the continent/country in which scholars may be located, journal articles are (becoming) the dominant outlet for research, not just in IS but across almost all research disciplines [Kalaitzidakis, Mamuneas, and Stengos 1999; Serenko and Bontis 2004]. Furthermore, there appears to be little disagreement about the *'more the better'* mindset we tend to hold with respect to evaluating individual scholars of the discipline (i.e., the more articles in high quality journals, the better the research). In an increasingly competitive scholarly environment, where the value of success is high and failure is an unpleasant option, the key actors in the journal publication game (including the journals, individual researchers, and institutions) in many cases are engaged in strategic action that can help enhance their own quality metrics. For example, journals may seek to enhance their reputations by managing their impact factors [Garfield 1972]; scholars by purposely increasing citations to their work, in overt and covert ways; and institutions by requiring their employees to publish in high impact journals and by hiring scholars who have done so in the past, or hold potential to do so in the future [Graves, Marchand, and Thompson 1982].

In this short paper, we first discuss the importance of journal publishing and the way this is now canonized to the extent that European and other governments are using number of publications in reputed journals as a direct measure of research quality, and basing their research grants allocations on the number of publications. It is no wonder that academics in all fields prioritize the number of publications and journal citations, and that editors/publishers are keen to increase the impact factor of their journal by overtly requesting citations to them. We then argue that there are more powerful influences than the direct request by editorial staff to authors for citing certain articles in the journal, and we utilize a framework of power use to illustrate this point. Next, we propose a short term strategy for counteracting the most negative implications of the focus on journal citations. Finally, we raise the need for a long term strategy focusing on the *real value* of our research and its importance to society, rather than the very narcissistic benchmarks and rankings that appear to consume many of us.

Importance of Journal Publications

The importance of gaining visibility through publications in well regarded journals has a long tradition in research communities. For the *assessment of individuals*, the number of citations is becoming an increasingly prominent benchmark [Serenko and Bontis 2004]. It is often used during the individual researchers' evaluation for promotion, as a basis for writing letters of recommendation, and for assessing job applicants for positions [Graves et al., 1982]. Very often, the number of citations forms the first basis for an assessment. It is now also routinely considered as a key characteristic of an individual researcher. A few clicks in Google Scholar or in Science – Thomson Reuters yield a quick benchmark of a person with respect to his/her peer group. We suggest that, in many cases, objective measures such as citation counts are used as a proxy for a more detailed, cumbersome assessment of the work of academics [Serenko and Bontis 2004; Grover, Segars, and Simon 1992]. Given that assessment committees are often looking for ways of accomplishing work "objectively" and "more efficiently," the simple (often far too simple) citation figures often carry a lot of weight. Indeed, the "ease of use" of these metrics (e.g., number of publications, citation counts) makes them an attractive alternative to comparing/assessing researchers through a more in depth evaluation, where much more preparation and argumentation is required on the part of the evaluators.

As regards the *assessment of journals*, we all know the importance attached to publishing in the best journals, and the haggling as to what constitutes the best journals of our field that goes on. Indeed, the AIS Web site lists nine surveys totaling approximately 125 journals, and the senior scholar basket offers a list of eight journals. Clearly the assessment or ranking of journals is a major issue for the IS/MIS community.

More importantly, authorities in several countries are now explicitly using the number of publications in highly rated journals as a basis for the allocation of basis research funds. In Europe it appears that this development started in the UK approximately 15 years ago, when a number of very powerful, academic cross institutional committees assessed the quality of journal articles produced by researchers in the different universities. Based on this evaluation universities were classified into five categories, in which the highest rated universities received increased research funds, while the lower rated universities lost funds. Here the more successful universities were the ones who managed to attract prolific journal paper writers [Kalaitzidakis et al., 1999]. This was because, if a person moved to another university, the journal publications of the academic (who moved) could be counted as output in the

new institution. Needless to say, this approach led to some dysfunctional effects. An interesting comment from a successful university dean was, “research is not something you do; it is something you buy.”¹

Governments in Denmark and Norway have taken the criteria of journal publications to new heights in the sense that allocation of public research funds to universities is to be directly based on research output (predominantly articles published in reputed international journals). The process was started in Norway a few years ago, where no less than approximately 20,000 journals in all fields were rated. This exercise has now been adopted in Denmark, where a total of 70 subject committees typically consisting of eight senior academics were established. The objective was first to validate the list of the 20,000 journals identified in Norway. Journals missing on the list were added and a few were taken off. Second, each committee had to rank the journals as first and second tier journals, and it was politically decided that there could only be about 20 percent in the first tier category.

The task for the IS committee (one of the 70) was to scrutinize a subset of 957 journals potentially relevant to IS from the original list of 20,000. Around 100 journals were agreed by the group to be first tier (this group includes journals not only from mainstream behavioral IS, but also more technical journals and others), and the list was submitted to the ministry. However, this list was not adopted by the ministry, since *several journals* (including CAIS and JAIS) *did not have a high enough ‘impact score’ to be accepted* according to the government’s pre-established minimum requirements for a first tier journal. This result caused the IS committee to protest, as did almost all other subject groups. At the end of April 2009, it was not yet clear whether the evaluation would go through, or the exact shape and form the final list will take. However, it seems clear that the Danish government is determined to go through with the exercise of establishing ‘objective’ measures of research output primarily in the form of the number of reputable international journal publications, and that it will base future allocation of government research funds on these measures.

It is clear that if researchers had not focused on writing papers in such international journal publications in the past, they need to re-orient themselves now. More than ever, Danish (and other European) research institutions will be required to meet this publication requirement -- even at the expense of other criteria such as ‘break-through’ research that could potentially change the world. Furthermore, the need is to publish in journals classified as ‘top tier’. Because the only way for a journal to qualify for the top tier list is to be cited, and because being cited is seen as a key measure of a scholar’s reputation, it is not surprising that citations are becoming critical for authors, editors, and publishers. We are likely to see an increase in overt requests for citing individual papers, or for citing specific journals.

II. A FRAMEWORK FOR CLASSIFYING THE USE OF POWER IN REFERENCING

To improve understanding of the most important disciplining influences on this citations ‘game’, we adapt the framework for classifying power exercise developed by Markus and Bjørn-Andersen [1987]. While referencing behaviors can be examined using a rational perspective, a bounded-rational perspective, an institutional perspective, and so on, we feel that a power analysis is particularly relevant to the conversation in this special set of papers.

Markus and Bjørn-Andersen’s original framework classifies the *context* of power exercise as being either specific development projects or IS policies. The *target* of power exercise is classified as being either factual or value oriented. To make this framework useful in our situation, we adapt it to deal with the two dimensions of *context* (review of an individual manuscript or the general policy of a journal) and *target* (overt exercising of power or covert exercising of power). As in the original paper, this dichotomy gives us a 2x2 matrix as shown in Figure 1, where we briefly explain how it relates to the influencing reference behavior.

Technical power exercise occurs through “rational persuasion” [Markus and Bjørn-Andersen 1987] of authors by the review panel -- the “experts” in the subject matter -- that they need to acknowledge (through citations) the works by a certain author or an article published in a certain journal. Here, the authors are expected to submit to the recommendations of experts who serve on the editorial panel, which the authors often do.

Structural power is exercised by creating “structures and routine... procedures that give [editors/publishers] formal authority” over the authors [Markus and Bjørn-Andersen 1987]. This is often done, for instance, by developing and using criteria for reviewing that asks the review panel to examine the extent to which authors cite papers from the

¹ For obvious reasons, the source must remain anonymous.

same journal. -When authors become aware of this structure, given the pressure to publish, many authors choose to comply with the structural demands.

Table 1. Overt and Covert Influences on Referencing Behaviors (Adapted from a framework for classifying on power exercise [Markus and Bjørn-Andersen 1987]).

Context	Target of power exercise	
	Overt/explicit	Covert/implicit
	Issues of direct intervention causing desired behavior	Issues of concealed intervention causing desired behavior
Individual manuscript	<p>Technical</p> <p>Specific request to add references to publications, typically by editor or reviewer</p>	<p>Political</p> <p>Authors will themselves inscribe their manuscript into the research tradition pursued by the journal they submit to and/or they will cite work of editors and potential reviewers when they submit articles to a journal</p>
Overall policy of journal	<p>Structural</p> <p>Publishers/editors include explicit evaluation criteria for reviewers to examine if sufficient references have been included in the manuscript under consideration</p>	<p>Symbolic</p> <p>Authors are socialized to cite certain authors and certain journals</p> <p>Mutual admiration clubs of academics are likely to flourish where the citation become one of the 'standard operating procedures'</p>

Political power exercise represents a more subtle form of power use. Based on past experiences, and anecdotes and stories of colleagues' experiences with the journal (e.g., positive outcome/disposition when the "right" papers are cited), the authors of the manuscript provisionally construct a conception of what works in the journal. They may proactively include citations of works by editorial board members and the editor, or try to associate with the traditions pursued by the journal by drawing disproportionately on articles in the journal. Since the costs of citing a few more articles is almost nil, we suspect that the phenomenon can increase the number of references both to the works of the editor/editorial board members and to the journal targeted.

Finally, *symbolic power* exercise in the context of citations occurs at an even deeper level by influencing the author's core values and attitudes, often during the socialization of the author in the doctoral education process. For example, many doctoral programs teach students, directly or indirectly, to include only top tier journal citations. Indeed, one of the authors observed this deep rooted value in multiple instances in which research colleagues' ideas may be triggered by (or developed using) works in a "lesser" journal, but some vaguely related article in a top tier journal may be acknowledged in the manuscript. Further, some supervisors may encourage the citation of works by a certain group of researchers, and discourage including works of the "rival camp" in the references. As a result of such socialization, mutual admiration societies among scholars can (and do) flourish. Since many scholars develop a core set of references during their formative years, they tend to use and re-use these references over a long period. It is likely that these habits would distort the citation counts (and reputations) of journals and individual scholars. Finally, the rampant use of obligatory citations for different topics (such as Yin [1994] for any paper based on a "case study") to signal to the journal evaluators that the authors know about the topic, irrespective of their relevance to the actual study reported in the paper, can be seen as another instance of this form of influence.

Implications

Basically, we have just two options: to *comply* with or to *sabotage* the existing system.

To comply, every member of the community, in fairness, should be made aware of the rules of the game, and the most efficient way to participate in the game – i.e., how to inscribe one's works in the tradition of the journals and also relate one's work to that of relevant others. Furthermore, attempts at more direct exertion of power is, and should be, deemed unethical in many cases, and we as a community should stand guard against such behavior, when appropriate. We should encourage whistle blowers to cry foul, e.g., by having public pillory or in the form of a place on the AIS Web site, where those stepping over the line could be listed. Dealing with the implicit power

exercise (i.e., political and structural) would be considerably more difficult, and it would require us as a research community to revisit the values on scholarship we hold, how we socialize our PhD students, and how the community evaluates researchers' and journals' reputations.

To sabotage the system would be a massive undertaking. But it could conceivably be achieved through development of an advanced IT based program capable of turning out journal articles, being reviewed by IT based reviewers, and be published in online journals. *All automatically*. These journals could receive high impact scores, because the articles would cross reference each other frequently. Such a system would be an example of the emperors' new clothes. Once realized, research managers and politicians would have to come up with a different system for evaluating research. Such a system would be tied much stronger to value contribution to society rather than output. It would have to focus on 'value' to different stakeholders (e.g., government, industry, users, IT functions) rather than results in the shape of journal articles primarily serving needs internal to the field.

III. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

As a consequence, we see a short term and a long term implication.

The short term implication is that we, as researchers, must bring our house in order. We cannot tolerate maverick behavior. We must ascertain that norms, with respect to citation requests, are formulated through community wide participation, communicated clearly, and abided by all concerned parties; we must also ensure that the system with journal rankings and citations is reasonably fair and transparent in picking winners and losers based on the specific rituals, that we all agree on. However, we should realize that, in the end, what we are subscribing to is predominantly an internal, self serving system, where we are evaluating each other and defining our own heroes based on an intricate system for evaluating and furthering a particular type of behavior. And we should realize that this behavior is often unrelated to the world around us, i.e., the quality of our teaching, industry practice, and government policies.

The long term implications are based on the premise that, to an increasing extent and in a not too distant future, the outside world footing our bill will insist on us providing (more) value. It is unlikely that students, politicians, and other funding agencies in the long run will favor research that does not provide value to society, irrespective of how good the citation counts look. More recently, one of the authors has been confronted with an explicit request from the EU project officer for our 7 million € research project that *the EU does not require 'output' but 'outcome'*. Output in the form of reputed journal articles and Ph.D. theses is fine, but what really counts is the kind of positive impact that the research project will have on such issues as 'competitiveness of European industries', 'the reduction in fraud in trans-border trade', or 'the integration of Europe.' We believe that the demand for relevance to society is a growing trend, which is likely to dwarf our attempts to carry out pure research and focus on internal, self serving means of research evaluation.

P.S.- It is not clear in April of 2009 exactly how much money Copenhagen Business School will receive as a result of publishing this article, but it is expected that some monetary reward will accrue. Accordingly, the authors would very much appreciate if this article is published!!!! We are prepared to share the proceeds with the editor!! (Sorry, misplaced (?) joke to stress what we as researchers are up against).

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