



## Opinion Piece

## Following the impact factor: Utilitarianism or academic compliance?

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## ABSTRACT

The use of impact factors has grown substantially in academia and publishing far beyond their original intended use. They are now used extensively in academic and research assessments as well as in the promotion of journals, publishers, institutions and individuals. The implications of such metricisation for understandings of research quality are discussed as well as for research strategies, the commercialisation of academic publishing, the disciplining of academic knowledge and publishing strategies, knowledge development and the further neoliberalisation of higher education. The paradoxes and problems of current and potential future directions are discussed including with respect to the development of open access publications.

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The fact that there are unintended consequences of the impact factor (IF) on individual and institutional behaviour in institutions has been well recognised over the years. The extent that careers and publications can be shaped by the compliance to journal metrics and rankings is outlined in the associated paper by Perdue, and is also reflected in our observations drawn from our own personal experience of attending interviews, promotion panels and from our participation in assessments of academic publishing. That this has become a subject to debate is welcome in the wider field. However, decisions with respect to the use and abuse of metrics do not occur in a vacuum. The use of the IF, along with other metrics, needs to be understood within the institutional context within which individual academics find themselves as well as identifying how they have been acculturated into the contemporary academic system (Coles, 2009; Coles, Hall, & Duval, 2006; Hall, 2005, 2010, 2011; Hall & Page, 2009, 2005; Visser, 2009). Issues which remain poorly discussed in the context of academic publishing in tourism. As Gibson and Klocker (2004) suggest, such research is now complicit within its own subject. Nevertheless, it is an industrial actor-network that requires greater analysis, debate and transparency.

The IF is only one of a number of metrics that are used within bibliometrics to assess certain characteristics of citation of articles (Amara & Landry, 2012; Bollen, Van de Sompel, Hagberg, & Chute, 2009; Franceschet, 2009, 2010; Pendlebury, 2009). Over time the use of IF and much of citation analysis in general has shifted from being a tool to assess the sociology of scholarship and knowledge (broadly defined) and track ideas (Garfield, 1979), to a short-hand de facto means of accounting for the quality of publications and, by default, their authors (Hall, 2011). This was not one of the originally intended purposes of the tool and, even though there are warnings as to its inappropriate use (e.g. Pendlebury, 2009) and its deficiencies (e.g. Vanclay, 2012), this remains a major selling point and utilisation of the metric, especially at a time when universities and governments are seeking to rationalise budget processes and focus on 'excellence'; publishers are seeking to maintain or increase journal subscriptions and financial returns; and academics outside of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects are increasingly having to defend their jobs and the relevance of their research.

The growth in the significance attached to the IF cannot be isolated from the rapid expansion and commercialisation of academic publishing (see Oppenheim, 2004; Steele, 2006; Willinsky & Wolfson, 2001) and the consequent development of research assessment exercises at the governmental and institutional level in different countries as policy-makers seek to target funding towards

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'quality' research outcomes (Hall, 2011). Such processes are mutually re-enforcing and reflect the way in which policy makers and university administrators confuse accounting and accountability. The present audit culture and systems of academic surveillance and control of government and, in some cases, institutional associations such as the UK Association of Business Schools (ABS) and the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC), combines the neoliberal economic imperatives of competition and academic entrepreneurship with the technologies of public management and publishing. The development of journal quality lists by institutional associations such as the ABS or the ABDC also serve to reinforce the disciplinary power of such organisations at the expense of more traditional academic associations as well as interdisciplinary research that is then excluded from the range of rated or acceptable journals for particular "business" fields. Within the increasingly dominant higher education competitiveness discourse of academic capitalism and the entrepreneurial university (Hall, 2010), the credibility of academic publishing and performance and perhaps the discourse itself is embedded in "a particular industrial actor-network of academic knowledge production, circulation and reception" (Gibson & Klocker, 2004: 425). An implication of this, according to Hall (2011: 26), is that "The more a narrow range of bibliometric tools are used as an 'efficient' measure of research quality tool the greater will be the influence of that particular actor network and its discourse". Such is the case with IF. If journals, publishers, institutions and policy makers promote the IF at the expense of other potential metrics or approaches it must assume significance, if it is promoted as only one of the wide range of means of assessing scientific impact then its significance would be considerably less.

Therefore, as journal and publication metrics can have a significant impact on careers and reputations as part of research assessment and funding regimes that increasingly focus on where one publishes rather than what one publishes (Coles, 2009; Hall, 2011, 2013), the way in which the IF is shaped is of considerable significance. The IF is embedded within several, often overlapping, approaches to the evaluation of the 'quality' of research output (Hall, 2011):

- Stated preference and ranking studies that are usually survey based.
- Citation-based studies, e.g. Web of Science (WoS); Scopus; Google Scholar (GS).
- A derived approach that extrapolates journal rankings from the ratings awarded in research assessments.
- A hybrid approach that uses a statistical and/or other combination of existing ranking lists including those from derived rankings and expert panels, e.g. UK ABS and ABDC journal quality guides and ratings.
- 'Expert panels' usually appointed by governments and/or other institutions (i.e. academic societies, universities) to evaluate research performance, e.g. UK Research Excellence Framework, New Zealand Performance Based Research Framework.

Without such exercises, and the credence given them by governments, institutions and some academics, the IF would have a much reduced impact on the selection of publication outlets. This includes not only journals, but arguably also books and book chapters.

An interesting development is the process implicit in the REF 2014 Unit of Assessment 26 in the UK (covering Sport, Tourism, Leisure and Hospitality), was their decision to read all submissions and to not use citation data, IFs or journal ranking lists (HEFC, 2015). Indeed, just because you publish in a top or low tier journal does not always necessarily create a definite measure of quality,

impact or intellectual rigour equivalent to the IF standing. This is because of the nuances of the refereeing process, differing standards of referees and community standards within a subject area may mean that journals may publish papers that exceed or are of lower quality than others recognise. Ultimately quality is in the eye of the evaluator and persons rating the piece of work given the subjectivity of reviewing and this in itself is subject to intellectual bias, i.e. simple categorisations in qualitative and quantitative research, or attitudes towards "exploratory research" (Research Assessment Exercise, 2009), as well as the disciplinary background when working in interdisciplinary fields like Tourism. Therefore, any committees or organisations relying simply upon IFs as a measure of quality may be well advised to actually solicit views of appropriate experts to read the material they have had submitted for review rather than simple lists based on IFs as the work may be of a higher or lower standard than is implied in the IF. In addition, in the Tourism field, the higher rated IF Journals are both those of longevity and in most cases (though exceptions exist as the paper by Chris Ryan in this collection of papers imply) are the more generic wide ranging as opposed to very niche journals. For that reason they tend to have a wider reach in the field than much more specialist and targeted Journals. However, it should also be noted that long lived tourism journals that have either been published outside of Europe or in languages other than English have also been historically disadvantaged in the application of quality metrics (Hall, 2013).

Yet we should not lose sight that the primary role of journals, along with other modes of publication, is to provide a platform for the production, dissemination and exchange academic knowledge including new research findings. Their use to rank research and scholarly work in order to aid the distribution of education and research funds or inform decisions concerning appointment and promotion is a secondary, but significant, dimension of the industrial actor-network of academic knowledge (Hall, 2005; Lee, Law, & Ladkin, 2014; Weiner, 2001). This includes not only how they are promoted to the members of the actor-network but also how the owners of the bibliographic databases who provide impact metrics have also developed businesses that provide international assessments and benchmarking reports to governments on the basis of such metrics. Publishing in periodicals and other publications that are included in the bibliographic databases have also become used as a metric in university rankings. The discourse of competitiveness that surrounds the announcement of IF, journal rankings and university rankings therefore further reinforces the centrality of the IF in the metricisation of higher education and the power of both the measure and its owner. However, not only is it only one of a number of possible measures of impact but it is also applied to a very specific population of the total universe of academic and scholarly communication.

Differences in the assessment of publications is a reflection of different methods, approaches and the size and nature of the defined population. For example, the ABS and ABDC assessments are derived from expert panels that determine the population of 'business' related tourism journals that are assessed. In addition to expert judgement their ratings are also referenced to pre-existing ratings and journal impact scores. In contrast bibliographic databases (WoS, Scopus) and GS have a much broader publication population from which they draw. Google does not publish the size of GS's database, Orduña-Malea, Ayllón, Martín-Martín, and Delgado López-Cózar (2014) estimated that it contained approximately 160 million documents as of May 2014. In contrast in 2014 WoS has about 57 million records, Scopus 53 million records and Microsoft Academic search sits between the two and is broadly of a similar size (Orduña-Malea et al. 2014). However, there are substantial differences in distribution of document types between

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