The social benefits expected from academia are generally identified as belonging to three broad categories: research, education and contribution to wider society. Universities and higher education institutions are meant to operate within these fields. However, evaluating the current state of academia according to these criteria reveals a somewhat disturbing phenomenon. It seems that an increased pressure to produce peer-reviewed articles creates an unbalanced emphasis on the research criterion at the expense of the other two. More fatally, the pressure to produce articles has turned academia into a rat race; the fundamental structure of academic behaviour has been changed, resulting in a self-defeating and counter-productive pattern.

Let us elaborate this last point: When applying for a position, the chances of being hired do not just depend on your absolute level of productivity, but also on how much you have published relative to your competitors. Of course, job applications mention other criteria such as the ability to teach, the ability to raise external funds and sometimes other false conditions like personality traits, and so forth. But, in the end, it is almost exclusively how much you produce in competition with people around you. Those who are involved in this competition - whether the competition is internal or external - faces a strong incentive to publish, and therefore everyone raises the standards for all.

The behaviour of male sea elephants seems to be analogous: The bigger a male is, the higher his chances of beating his opponents during fights and, thus, gaining access to females. If a male makes a better attempt to maximise the reproductive performance of males, a self-defeating dynamic is clearly at work here.

We should remind ourselves that ‘to publish more’ is not an intrinsically good thing. First, to be useful a publication should bring forth new knowledge. Secondly, the academics are pressured to publish, the more they tend to publish everything. Most of us have received similar advice from an older colleague: ‘no matter what, just publish, publish, publish everything’. Consequently, the standard volume of published work is rising for everyone and, everything else being equal, the quality of everyone’s publications must be going down.

Secondly, it is a banal point, but someone should read it: If not, there is no advantage at all to be had. Again, the more academics that publish, the less they pay attention to each other’s work, for the simple reason that they won’t have the time to read other people’s stuff. The picture is quite absurd. The average number of readers per academic article varies from below 1 (it is an average) to a handful of people. A common joke among academics is to say that, on average, four people read every academic article, the anonymous referee, the author herself and her mother.

More seriously, why put such an emphasis on publications if so few people actually access the knowledge? It is particularly worrying if we consider the fact that the majority of ‘innovation’ flows from our ability to produce new ideas that will be discussed by peers. Academia has always been a community of ideas based on the confrontation of arguments and enquiries. It has been this way because this kind of human interaction produces the most benefits. But, in reality, academia appears more like a rat race. The point here is that it has become impossible to read everything of value – or just a reasonable selection of it – that is published in each of our fields. The chance is high that we will lose track of some important contributions, new developments and occasions to produce better research. Moreover, in order to publish somewhere, we are forced into ever higher degrees of specialisation. Consequently, we find ourselves locked inside highly specific, tall and narrow ivory towers, with very little knowledge about the forest of ivory towers surrounding us.

If we take the question to another level, the problem is that publications are only one kind of social benefit that a society can expect from its higher education. Colleges and universities also have an educational purpose. They are supposed to offer valuable courses and consistent pedagogical follow-up. If we were completely rational, we would be forced to see teaching as a burden, time wasted for our research and publications. In Denmark where we work, the most efficient researchers are usually relieved of their teaching duties and this ‘burden’ then falls largely on the shoulders of younger researchers. The consequence of this is that they do not get the time they really need to improve their own research and cannot provide the quality of teaching normally associated with well-established professors.

Moreover, while specialties might be productive in the natural sciences (though there are good reasons to doubt this as well), specialisation within the humanities makes fertile points of contact between individual scholars and society ever harder to achieve. In terms of the third social benefit – contribution to wider society – there might be fewer popular articles, contributing to social debates, organising conferences open to a wider public, since these activities will not be seen as necessary by our employers. As a result, society is losing some of its richness and the social benefit produced by universities is declining. In sum, the gap is increasing between researchers in their ivory towers and the rest of society. Without advocating for the return of the collegial ethics of the last century, it is still plausible to find one regrettable that academics in the humanities and social sciences are largely absent from the public scene.

Two further remarks: First of all, it should be recognised that we are all responsible for this situation. By trying to stand out from the crowd, by over-gauging the requirements for everyone else, it resembles what is known in game theory as the ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ or social coordination problem. What is rational to do as an economist, her heart is collectively self-defeating: it is a so-called ‘smart for one, dumb for all’ logic. Secondly, what can be done? One solution raised by, among others, Alain de Botton consists of paying less attention to our relative positions in the publications pecking order. The problem is that standing apart from the competition almost means giving up the chance of having a scientific position. In the existing system it does not seem to be a viable option. It simply clashes with the structure of incentives that academics face – to publish more than their competitors.

Other solutions include restricting the amount of working hours (which can be seen as a justification for incremental taxes on extra hours worked) to expand the array of criteria for evaluating the contributions of a given academic. It would be even more desirable inasmuch as more of the social benefits of universities would be produced through cooperation, and not just competiting. More cooperation among academics might bring about the more desirable scenario where fewer but better articles would be published, and at lower psycho-social costs. In order to realise this scenario, we need to move away from a common misconception about academic work, sometimes fostered by academics themselves: the idea of the lonely, secluded genius, developing his or her ideas in isolation, in silent communion with books and papers. As a knowledge producer, academia has always relied on the exchange of ideas and knowledge, an idea that has been undermined by the extraordinarily competitive behaviour propelled by a heavy reliance on individual production.

So, our contention is that combining the idea of the lonely genius with that of ‘more production equals better quality’ engenders the fatal notion that we should structure incentives so as to ‘squeeze as much out of those brainiacs as possible’. But consider: is it not plausible that a single article, carefully constructed through dialogue and criticism in academic forums, informed by several (even academic) disciplines, can be better, and contribute more to both research and the public than 10 highly specialised peer-reviewed articles, read only by a handful of experts? Certainly, expanding the range of criteria will not (and should not) cancel out competition. It will not change the fact that some researchers will fare better than others, but it might result in an academia with better working conditions for those involved and, more importantly, fewer but more quality articles. However, the current national and international standards for research evaluation give the universities no strong incentive to change the current situation. Hardly surprising, but it does confirm that this is a matter for political attention at the highest levels!

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