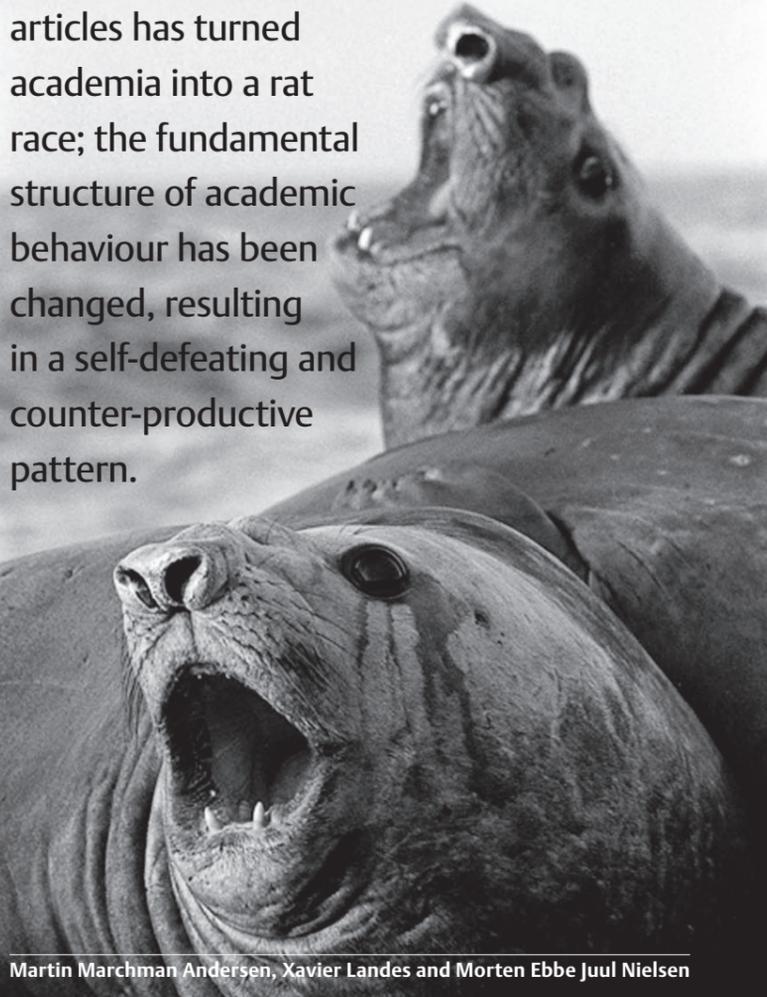


Opinion: On academia and sea elephants

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.



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THE NUMBER OF WORKING HOURS among academics and researchers is on a constant rise. They bracket their lives and devote ever increasing amounts of time and energy to their work, which often impacts their personal life. They spend less and less time with their partners, children, relatives or friends; they experience loneliness and stress. A study published some years ago on the well-being of academics in Great Britain found that their levels of psychological distress were worse than those of accident and emergency staff (nurses and doctors).¹ Almost half of British academics experience levels of stress requiring medical intervention. In our experience, this pattern is consistent across Europe and North America: different places, different people, same story.

It seems plausible that at least a part of this pattern can be explained by the increased pressure to produce articles in peer-reviewed journals – certainly within the humanities and social sciences – since that has become the main criterion of evaluation. Terrific levels of productivity in this one domain have now become the prerequisite for obtaining tenure or funding, and the exigency has become even more pressing in a context of economic downturn. (To be clear here, the point is not to abandon the principle of competition, but nevertheless: endorsing competition as a principle does not mean accepting all the potential flaws that follow from a particular structure of competition.) In any case, this over-emphasis comes at the cost of other social benefits and, as we shall argue, even at the cost of the thing which it is supposed to foster, namely quality research. As a result, academics are stuck in a ‘race to the bottom’.

Above: Are academic publications lists as bloated? Sea elephants on Amsterdam Island in the Indian Ocean. Photo by StormPetrel1.

When applying for a position, the chances of being hired do not just depend on your absolute level of publications, but on how much you have published relative to your competitors.

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 publications, but 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 fussy conditions like personality traits, and so forth. But, in the end, it is almost exclusively how much you produce *in comparison with people around you* that counts. As a result, anyone involved in the competition 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 the females. In this evolutionary process the competition has reached a level where males often suffocate females during the reproductive act due to their excessive dimensions.² If one considers that the purpose of inflation is 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 intrinsic good. First, to be useful a publication should bring forth some new insight. The more 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 *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 are pressured to 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 an article: the two anonymous referees, 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 something, we are forced into ever higher degrees of specialisation. Consequently, we find ourselves locked in 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 young researchers, who actually need more time for their own research and cannot provide the quality of teaching normally associated with well-established professors. Moreover, while specialisation 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* – why should we bother writing popular articles, contributing to social debates, organising conferences open to a wider public, since these activities will not help us to get a position or gain recognition from 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 *intellectuals engagés* of the last century, it is still plausible to find it 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, we are raising 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 according to immediate self-interest 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.³ But the problem is that standing apart from the competition almost certainly means giving up on the chance of a decent academic 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) or applying strong negative normative judgements to high achievers, justified by specific social conventions. It is uncertain whether the first option is enforceable since it is (1) difficult to evaluate the amount of hours effectively worked and (2) difficult to enforce such a restriction (especially in a context of international and decentralised competition). Regarding the second option, some uneasiness stems from its intrusive and indiscriminate character. Peer pressure of this kind could have a healthy impact, but it could also promote a harsh conformism and undermine the positive impact of competition, especially in an environment that pretends to be innovative.

These suggestions illustrate that there is no straightforward solution. A more workable option would be to value achievements and contributions other than publications and, thus, 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 competition. 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*, in dialogue, something which is currently being undermined by the extremely 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 points of view and academic (sub-) disciplines, can be *better*, and contribute *more* (to both research and the public) than 10 highly specialised peer-reviewed articles, read only by those peer reviewers? 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 qualified 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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Notes

- 1 Kinman, Gali et al. 2006. ‘The Well-being of the UK Academy, 1998-2004’, *Quality in Higher Education*, 12:1, pp.15-27
- 2 Frank, Robert. 1999. *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess*. New York: The Free Press. pp.150-2
- 3 De Botton, Alain. 2004. *Status Anxiety*. New York: Vintage Books

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