Academic Publishing – An Annotated Inventory of Challenges and chosen Pathways

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ACADEMIC PUBLISHING – AN ANNOTATED INVENTORY OF CHALLENGES AND CHOSEN PATHWAYS

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ABSTRACT

Context and Purpose: The increased focus of higher education institutions on research and – lately – on societal challenges and real-world problems, the importance of academic rankings for financing and international competitions and the research and publication oriented professional advancement criteria transformed academics into publishing hunters. The world of academic publishing is wild and dangerous, due to the massification of research. Aims and objectives are often confounded with means, quantity and quality (already difficult to assess) don't always walk together, stakeholders have conflicting interests, the old linear models of publishing are replaced with intricate looped and interconnected ones, leading to academics publishing more and achieving less – especially from a societal perspective. The aim of the present study is to summarize the main challenges of the publishing process, together with the pathways chosen by academics to overcome these difficulties.

Design/methodology: A meta-analysis of recent studies on academic publishing was performed, together with a nethnographic exploratory approach on publishing patterns in economics and business; informal talks with academics from business and economics fields from several Eastern EU higher education institutions were used, as well.

Findings: The inventory of challenges includes individual factors (personality and individual morale, goals, knowledge and status, preferences and habits), institutional factors (university and strategy level), social structures and infrastructural level factors (open access, technological disruptive innovations, new social contract for research, preprints), as well as professional culture type of factors (peer-review issues and various biases, alternative research assessment methods, predatory journals, predatory informal rules). Several pathways chosen by academics were observed, leading to hypotheses formulation for future research.

Limitations: The study is exploratory, based on a conventional sample of academics for the empirical part and has an emic, potentially subjective approach.

Originality/value: The study touches a delicate and controversial subject – academic publishing – and brings together both positive and negative aspects for existent pathways, offering a ground for future research.

Keywords: higher education research; publishing models; publishing culture; publishing influence factors; academic publishing pathways.

JEL Classification: I23, M12, M14, D73, D83

1. INTRODUCTION

The "publish or perish" syntagma is old, yet still so vivid and valid that we can't imagine seeing it vanishing one day. Higher education institutions focus on research more than ever, and just lately consider societal challenges and real-world problems. The importance of academic rankings for financing and international competitions and the research and publication oriented professional advancement criteria transformed academics into real publishing hunters, running for high impact trophies. The world of academic publishing is wild and dangerous, due to the massification of research. Aims and objectives are often confounded with means, quantity and quality (already difficult to assess) don't always walk together, there are as many conflicting interests as different stakeholders. The old linear models of publishing are replaced with intricate looped and strongly interconnected ones, leading to exhausted academics who publish more and achieve less – not only from a societal perspective.

The context is the one created by the so necessary, yet so far away from perfection evaluation of journals.

Two big mainstream approaches exist for a qualitative classification of journals – one based on stated preferences, the other one on revealed preferences (Harzing and Wal, 2009). The first one is based on sets of criteria established by certain scientific communities, institutions or fields of research, and lead to a considerable amount of various classification lists (British ABS Journal Quality Guide, French CNRS Journal Ranking, Romanian CNCS or UEFISCDI rankings, Polish Journal Ranking etc.) The second one considers the publication patterns and citation analyses. Huge amounts of literature have been written about journal rankings, the dominant approach being still the one suggested in the 70s by Eugene Garfield (Institute for Scientific Information), based on impact factors, to which the more recent approaches are added – Hirsch H-index proposed in 2005, the PageRank algorithm used by Google Scholar, the CiteScore of Scopus, Scimago, etc. All these measures have advantages and disadvantages, and many critiques and abuses were signaled in time: manipulation possibilities, due to different number of pages published yearly, discrimination in favor of older journals, huge differences between disciplines and fields of research, irrelevant international coverage due to the dominant language, the underrepresented developing countries and the limited number of countries represented as a whole, incorrect evaluation of authors versus journals in which they publish, the biases introduced by the absolute and average number of authors for an article in various fields, possible manipulation of citations through peer review practices, scientific

"co-sanguinities" of reviewers, and the list could continue (Cameron, 2005; Moed, 2005; Chapman *et al*., 2019; Leydesdorff, 2008; Harzing and Wal, 2009; Hirsch, 2020). It is actually quite significant the most recent opinion of the H-index creator (Hirsch, 2020), who bitterly admits that these factors and indices need to be used wisely, because they can have severe, unintended consequences, they influence the publishing behavior of academics, deterring researchers from innovative thinking, making research sensitive or even limited to fashionable subjects, ignoring research outside the mainstream.

Fong and Wilhite (2017) noticed that besides inherent and somehow objective limits of journals and authors' evaluation, there are increased authorship and citation manipulations in the publishing world: scholars who, from various reasons, add authors to their research papers or grant proposals even when those individuals don't have any contribution to the research, journal editors or reviewers who indirectly yet strongly nudge authors to add citations not necessarily pertinent to their work, academics artificially increase their references lists with unnecessary citations of articles they did not read. Explained by the more and more intense competition for limited journal space and research funding, these manipulations are encouraged by other factors, as well, pertaining to academic reward systems: the number of publications is quite often the single most influential component of performance reviews, changing sometimes places with the journal impact factor of publications and the order of authorship. Even with the best intentions, peer-review processes have serious limits, besides obvious benefits, and add to the challenges of the academic publishing process (Fong and Wilhite, 2017; Kelly *et al.,* 2014; Padmalochanan, 2019).

Language is a serious barrier for the access to higher ranked journals (Meneghini and Packer, 2007; Sambunjak *et al.,* 2009; Moed *et al.,* 2020). This is a serious obstacle for non-native English speakers, lead sometimes to questionable publishing decisions, due to the inaccessible serious journals. And even more, affiliation matters and alters publishing behaviors (networking, acceptance versus rejection, discrimination, etc. (Smith *et al.,* 2014) To make the image more vivid, vanity and predatory journals entered the scene, with questionable peer-reviews, fraudulent conferences and special issues, intertwined financial interests and intricate corruption of real science (Colquhoun, 2011; Beall, 2012; Bowman, 2014).

A supplementary complication arises from the relevance-rigour and theoretical-applied debates. The managerial relevance of research is sometimes in contradiction with the required "technicality" of research, academic quality and relevance walking sometimes on different paths (Ankers and Brennan, 2002; Baldrige *et al.,* 2004).

The pressure to have good CVs and a good institutional image are other perturbing factors. Time, institutional constraints, limited resources, and the urge to "look good" when promoting or applying to various competitions make "cosmetician" PR strategies seem appropriate; some academics start to confound

being a good researcher with looking like a good researcher, publishing the right thing with publishing in the "right" place, substance with surface image (Zaiț, 2004; Gioia and Corley, 2002; Segalla, 2008).

New trends become visible in the turbulent evolving landscape of academic publishing. Specialists notice a change from linear models to looped ones, pressure for open reviews, an increased focus on societal relevant research, alternative indicators, disruptive technological innovations, new social contracts in research and preprints, the rise of the open access philosophy – all influencing the publishing behavior at individual and institutional level (Björk, 2004; Rowlands and Nicholas, 2005; Vincent-Lancrin, 2006; Gu and Blackmore, 2016; Tennant *et al.,* 2016; Ponte *et al.,* 2017; Braverman, 2018; Tulley, 2019; Walsh *et al.,* 2019; LSE, 2019; Scholastica, 2020; Infante, 2020). Although the open access seems to be the light at the end of the tunnel, many barriers still exist: legal framework, IT infrastructure, business models, indexing services, academic reward systems, marketing and critical mass, plus significant financial aspects for Eastern EU academics.

Finally, apart from these external factors, individual ones also shape academics' publishing behaviors – factors related to personality, motivations, perceptions, previous experiences, goals and research preferences (Darnon *et al.,* 2007; Shin and Cummings, 2010; Edwards, 2014; Vandewalle *et al*., 2019).

This is the complex context in which academics have to play, that lead us to the present exploratory study, whose aim is to summarize the main challenges of the publishing process, together with the pathways chosen by academics from business and economics, located in Eastern EU countries, to overcome these difficulties.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study used an exploratory, qualitative approach in order to find out the ways in which academics perceive the publishing challenges and adopt certain pathways in their careers. A non-structured nethnographic analysis of publishing patterns in economics and business was performed first. We analyzed public CVs, Google Scholar profiles and Clarivate profiles for a number of academics in business and economics from Romania, Poland, Bulgaria, Slovak and Czech Republic (members of a research network), as well as those of academics from the main Romanian universities with specializations in economics and business administration; the approach was meant as both an identification and control instrument for the non-structured informal interviews (it was important to observe the type of journals in which they published, the teams of authors and the subjects chosen). At a second stage, informal talks with academics from business and economics fields from Romania and the mentioned Eastern EU countries took place, four times over a period of two years – during two international conferences that took place in Romania and to conferences who took place in Poland and the

Slovak Republic (convenience sample, 21 people, mostly professors – highest academic position). Transcripts were used for a content analysis using an a-priori coding procedure (based on the literature review presented in the introduction). Two coding procedures were performed on the same transcripts (for several randomly chosen items), with a one-month interval in between, to check for the reliability of the categories extraction, considering the fact that only one investigator was used; a 0.9 Cohen K was obtained for the checked items. The analysis was conceptual, and only the presence of the codes and categories was registered, not the weight (Zaiţ, 2016). The main categories and themes from the next section were thus obtained.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Challenges

The content analysis of the informal interviews revealed the presence of the following main challenges directly and indirectly stated by academics:

- individual factors (personality and individual morale – what is or is not appropriate/correct/moral in terms of publishing; goals – being a performing person, being an expert, being better; knowledge and academic status; preferences and habits – quantitative versus qualitative, scientific friendship);
- institutional factors (university and strategy level factors – internal annual evaluation, wage bonuses, research strategy- or lack of research strategy);
- social structures and infrastructural level factors (possibilities for open access, technological innovations; researchers' image in society);
- professional culture type of factors (peer-review issues and various perceived and real biases, paid journals – with a blurred distinction between paid and predatory, informal rules – this is how things are done, research projects' evaluators mismatch).

3.2 Academics' chosen pathways

In this section we synthesized all the solutions (labeled pathways) mentioned by academics in order to overcome the perceived challenges. The following pathways were obtained:

- "Hard way" - top targets, good journals, no scientific or moral compromise, difficult, long wait; pathway walked alone or with carefully chosen co-authors with similar principles;
- "Intermediate way"- normal networking and co-authoring efforts; mix of journals, avoiding the "black sheep" (journals with shaded reputations)
- "Wise hunting" - looking for special issues of good journals, alone or with co-authors, team effort;

- "Short way national"- shortcut pathway, journals with an entrance, strategic co-authors, mainly at national level;
- "Short way international"- shortcut pathway, more accessible international journals, mostly recent ones, networking and strategic co-authors;
- "No compass way" – no strategy, no preference, lower ranked journals to survive.

All ways can be walked with individual support, group support or institutional support.

3.3 Reasons for taken shortcuts in publishing

The whole approach was a non-judging one, with an explicit intention of finding reasonable explanations for the adopted pathways which could be questionable. All researchers offered answers, independent of the chosen pathway. These explanations were classified into two categories, as it follows.

"White" reasons:
- The local specificity consideration;
- The language issues;
- Publishing for training and initiation, for gaining experience;
- Knowledge bridging in cases of limited access to resources;
- Knowledge gap-filling (new issues to be investigated, narrow or unconventional issues, interdisciplinary issues).

"Grey" reasons:
- Lower scientific requests/barriers;
- Quick response in the evaluation process;
- Quick career advancement;
- Fear of repeated rejection;
- Research projects' constraints;
- Inadequate national or institutional support;
- Group interests.

4. LIMITATIONS

The study has certain limitations, due to the exploratory nature, the convenience non-representative sample used for the informal interviews, the delicate subject and the emic involvement of the investigator.

5. CONCLUSIONS

We found in our study most of the challenges previously identified in the literature, especially for academics from countries outside the Western world (in line with Hapman et al, 2019; Chavarro et al, 2017; Fong and White, 2017;

Colquhoun, 2011; Baldridge et al, 2004). For the chosen pathways and stated reasons, a quantitative research should be designed, in order to have a quantitative description and especially weight of each pathway. More than this, we would rather conclude with questions for the future: *What do we really want from academics? How do we encourage the desired behaviours? How do we deal with non-controllable factors in such a particular environment, with normal subjectivity limits and inherent differences of views?* These exploratory results show that even when some things remain unspoken, they don't simply vanish, and a lack of action will not solve the myriad of issues from the academic publishing world, and specific difficulties for emergent countries academics might be an extra burden.

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