

Commentary:**PUBLISHING JOURNAL ARTICLES: MEASUREMENTS OF EXCELLENCE AT THE EXPENSE OF EXCELLENCE**

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Author's Note

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It is considered mandatory for an academician to publish an article to get promotion. In Ethiopian universities publication of an article or articles in reputable journals is a mandatory requirement for promotion to the rank of Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and Professor. In the worst case, an academician may lose his job for not publishing; many higher education institutions around the globe have this strong rule -“publish or perish”. Hence, failing to publish articles is worrisome for academicians. In this commentary the problems that come with these kinds of pushy principles and that

should be taken in to consideration are presented. This commentary is not the outcome of an empirical research, though with a potential to attract researchers. Nor does this commentary attempt to undermine the relevance of journal articles.

Articles are instruments through which knowledge is communicated with the purpose to further advance existing ideas, to question existing knowledge systems, and to bring new insights. Hence, it requires capability to come up with journal articles, and that is why they are considered by educational institutions as major preconditions for the recognition and promotion of academicians. But the fact that doing so is mandatory raises serious problems; most of these problems are underestimated, ignored, or unknown. Some problems are related with philosophical questions and others are practical issues that we see around us. After challenging the philosophical underpinnings of the conventional assumption that one has to publish to excel, I will raise the problems I witnessed that are the outcome of such a strongly held position.

The philosophical foundation of this principle seems to be that knowledge refers to what is written in journal articles. The implicit assumption of putting publishing articles in journals as a precondition for promotion is that one has to publish in order to excel and be considered knowledgeable. The measurement of excellence is a written knowledge. Hence, knowledge is but what an article holds. An idea, however novel, is not considered knowledge if it does not exist in an article. A novel idea that one academician presents in various forums, workshops, public gatherings, class rooms, social media etc. is not fit enough to measure his capability and knowledge. This logic holds a similar belief that the only way of knowledge dissemination is journal article. This has a problem of considering a tool as an end objective; scholars should be valued for the possession of the knowledge, not for publishing such knowledge. They should publish to disseminate such knowledge.

The other assumption that can be found in such a firm conclusion that publishing is the major source of promotion is that teaching is echoing existing assumptions. The teacher is assumed to be informative than evaluative. The lecturer is not recognized as

critical intellectual who can impact students' intellectual life. Besides delivering the knowledge he got through reading, a lecturer can also provide his students with his critical assessment of existing theories or he can give new insights, thereby inspiring the students to make new investigations. Those students who got such a lecturer may end up making great influence on their field. It is known that many writers have introduced the ideas of their lecturers, who did not publish their own ideas, through articles or books for which they got promotion. The student is promoted for introducing the ideas of his teacher who died without receiving any promotion. Besides, a less efficient lecturer can get promotion for publishing an article. Hence, universities are devaluing the major objective for which they stand; a lecturer in Ethiopian universities has 75% work load of teaching and 25% load for both conducting research and rendering community service. The major task of lecturers is not the major source of his promotion. This is due to the implicit assumption that teaching is non innovative, non critical, dogmatic and un-inspirational, this being another major philosophical drawback.

Another foundational problem is related with how we should measure one's academic contribution. Publishing has become an end by itself. As far as there is no clear standard to assess an article's contribution/impact, it can be fairly concluded that publishing an article is a contribution in itself. We are not assessing what impact a given publication has made; though it is not read by anyone, it is considered for promotion since it is an article. What we witness is the evaluation of journal's reputation without examining the impact of particular articles. If a journal qualifies the requirement of respective higher institutions (Arba Minch university requires, among other things, that a journal should have editorial board, regularity, and a volume number of at least 4), no matter the impact, any article will excel an academician.

It is difficult to say that many articles do not bring any impact. But, it is difficult to take them to the level that they become major criteria in promotion and job security, at the expense of those arguments that do not exist in publications. The later may make an equal or greater impact than the former. It is important to see the fact that many of us have similar stand with the many articles we read.

This means that we have closer or similar intellectual ability, if not greater, with those who are given recognition of excellence since they got these stands published. The gist of this paragraph is that the fundamental assumption of publish or perish principle has implicitly accepted that it is only the writer of any particular article who thinks, reviews or criticizes in such a way and that is why he got promotion. Therefore, the principle forces us to devalue excellent minds who have not published for various reasons. It cannot help us distinguish the academician who wrote an article from the one who digested and evaluated the knowledge written in hundred articles.

The assumption also strongly implies that scholars in host universities who review researches submitted to the respective universities' research coordination offices are under-qualified. From the practice we conclude that the logic behind this promotion requirement is that our universities do not have capable scholars. But, to the contrary, we see these scholars working as reviewers for various journals. Hence, if the testimony of this world renowned academician is given in the defense session organized by research coordination offices of respective universities, you will not get

promotion. However, if lesser quality research is accepted by a reviewer of lesser academic record in journals, it will be considered in giving recognition. How is that a professor's acceptance is not valued by host university? Does he need to make such comment in a journal for his judgment of papers to be used for promotion? For instance, the rule neglects those researches that are proved to have significant contribution by highly qualified reviewers, but uploaded on YouTube, Facebook or other ways. To be specific, what if this paper was previously accepted by those who now reviewed it in this journal? Is it because the former is in Arba Minch University's archive? The difference is may be that the latter lack indexing and volume number.

The above idea reveals another fundamental limitation. It is clear that journals are created to create a forum for certain ideas. This indicates that all ideas cannot be accepted by a journal; there are different journals for different fields. Hence, new developing issues for which there are no readymade journals are considered nonintellectual. There were no journals before the development of sociological thoughts, for instance. Ideas come before journals. Ideas

are spread through the later. However, the principle that this article sets to challenge assumes that journals create the former.

The principle also strongly believes that writers are trustworthy. In the absence of efforts to cross check the identity of the writer, publishers have no option but to believe that the real writer of the article is the one with the name that appears in the paper since publishers and reviewers are located far away from the writer. Due to the fact that one's job security or promotion is mainly guaranteed by publishing articles, it is not unusual to see people publishing articles that they have others write for them. Hence, this principle does not only limit knowledge to what is in articles but also says each person who is mentioned as an author produces such knowledge.

The requirement of Ethiopian higher education institutions does not seem to urge academic staff to publish articles in order to be promoted. It put that the tasks of academic staff are teaching, conducting research, and rendering community services. However, the requirement for promotion does not acknowledge those

researches that are not published as an article and are in the university's archive however outstanding and problem solving they are. How is it that an article is considered worthy over a good research (which is not published or is yet to be published) that is proven to be solving academic, social, economic, or political problems? This is a customary practice that the very existence of universities does not seem to hold as binding legal status. This is because, as per the contract, one should have been assessed to be considered for promotion based on teaching, research, and community service, not publishing articles.

In addition to the above fundamental philosophical flaws, this rule of promotion has led to the raise of actual problems that are not too far from our observation. Many of these problems come from the fact that publishing is considered as an end by itself by many scholars; writing for the sake of writing is a visible experience. Publishing is not a source for the enhancement of one's experience as a scholar for many; many publish to be promoted to higher ranks or to stay on a job. This has developed a technocratic thinking among

colleague academicians. Without due concern given to the process they pass through, academicians want to see publication.

Unfortunately, academicians do involve in acts of trickery to quickly get in to higher ranks or stay on their job. Many academicians publish in low quality journals that host universities do not know. Others have others write for them, though this is unlikely to exist for many scholars. Many have been mentioned as coauthors on papers for which they did not contribute any; reviewers cannot know who did not contribute. Others still come up with research papers for which they did not collect any data. Since the measurement is publishing, we give certificate of excellence to such mischievous scholars at the expense of excellence.

Though there are many factors for the rejection of manuscripts, lack of originality seems to be the commonly mentioned reason. It is usually stated that an article should make a new insight to be considered for publication. This forces the academician, who is desperate to be promoted or stay in the job, to be alienated from the existing body of knowledge. Reading is not enjoyable anymore;

academicians, who are rushing, read to find ‘faults’ that they can capitalize on to convince reviewers that they have come up with original ideas. Reading ends up being fault finding business, at the expense of enhancing understanding. Giving significant contribution is a gradual process that comes after a lengthy reading. Publish or perish motto prohibits many to develop depth of thoughts for they cannot make deep reading.

Obsession with being original also has other costs. Writers submit manuscripts that they think are beyond reviewers’ capacity to reject them. This is due to the reason that writers intentionally bring new cases that are too far for the reviewers and other scholars to verify. Others also bring hypothetical scenarios as real cases and end up publishing them-‘excelling’. In addition, many others tend to stand against theories or knowledge systems that they truly believe in so that they come up with new ideas. These cases contribute for the development of bizarre thoughts that might have never existed had there been no publish or perish principle that contribute for confusion and lack of concreteness in a discipline. It is common to see many engaging in abstract arguments that are too difficult to comprehend.

The indulgence to appear different is the unintended consequence of these rules of promotion.

We are rejecting excellence by our obsession for publication of journal articles. Excellent researches and scholars are not given recognition of excellence, i.e., they are not excellent, for they have disseminated their excellent thoughts through other ways other than journals. Hence, excellence is underestimated by our measurement of excellence. Avoidance of this measurement does not reduce the quality of excellent researches in our universities' libraries, archives, and shelves. Hence, universities have to give credit for these researches instead of leaving the approval to distant reviewers working for journals created for profit. This measurement should be redefined; it should be discussed and debated once again. What should replace this measurement will come out of these discussions.