

Yet the Librarians Were Not Without a Cunning Plan

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Ours is an age of growth fundamentalism and institutionalised distrust—otherwise known as quality control.

I'd like to make use of this occasion to say a few words on how the ideologies of growth and quality control by quantification affect the publication of research in the humanities today, and then give some indications of how a consortium like Open Humanities Press, partly in alliance with university libraries, proposes to address the current crisis in the Humanities.

But before I do so I ask you to indulge me as I briefly explore some of the constitutive contradictions of growth fundamentalism. I appreciate this kind of talk may perhaps seem inappropriate in the present context, yet I hope it may help to explicitate the location I am writing from to address a condition we all share but which affects us in different ways.

Growth fundamentalism affects every area of human endeavour, and like most flourishing ideologies, but in this case with unusual and disarming explicitness, it masks the contradictions riddling it to the core through specious recourse to a naturalising master trope. What could be more natural than 'growth' as a model for human enterprise? Perhaps nothing, but that doesn't make it alright—for there are good reasons to suspect that natural models as such are not necessarily good templates for human historical practice. Not simply because humans are somehow un-natural animals—which they are—, but more interestingly because tropes modeling human behaviour through natural analogies paradoxically tend to forget the first thing about the nature they derive their authority from.

One feature of growth that growth fundamentalism itself is constitutively in denial about is the logic of limitation that determines natural growth and binds it to life understood as continuous metabolic activity. Organisms grow and then they die and there's an end on it—but the economy, the master model of the human animal in the modern condition (stupid!), must keep growing. It might be objected here that, yes, organisms must die (though there may be some debate here about intricate ancient fungal set-ups), but they transmit the information that defines them in networks of exponential multiplication that can cover the planet. Consider grasses, for instance, one of the most successful life forms on our planet—partly because they cleverly piggy-backed on another even more successful species--: they just keep growing. It is precisely the apparently limitless growth potential of grass that accounts for its

successful cultivation of humans as privileged carriers of its genes. A moment's reflection on the basics of metabolism reveals that limitlessness as an illusion, fed by the typical herd behaviour of grass and its characteristic hardiness—but it is an attractive illusion, feeding fantasies of infinity as immortality alive human animals are particularly sensitive to. It is suggestive in this respect that “grass” and “growth” share an etymological root (so to speak) and that “growth” as applied to humans and other animals supplanted the Old English “weaxan” only relatively recently (roughly 14th century). For “grow” is less haunted by its other than “wax” is by “wane” and is therefore a more flexible figure in the service of human death-denial, itself a core component of growth fundamentalism.

But I digress. All I wanted to do was to defamiliarise the notion of growth which has twisted the logic of economy away from its concern for the radically para-natural and constitutively contestible law of the house, and has given it the aura of incontrovertibility associated with so-called laws of nature, otherwise known as facts—despite the fact that in natural fact growth is necessarily limited. A deluded understanding of a natural model is projected onto an area of human conduct to give that conduct a rule that naturalises it beyond contestation even as it consolidates the swerve of the human away from the natural. The basic rule in this particular case being “more is more and that's the law”—not even “more is better”, for “better” involves a differentiating value-judgement which fact-fetishist fantasies of infinity tend to suspend, and at least entertains the possibility of less as an option. And for growth fundamentalism less is not an option but a transgression of the law.

Applied to scientific and scholarly research, the rule of growth fundamentalism is what pushes academics to produce more and more stuff. That has become the nature of academic work—and “nature” is barely a metaphor anymore here: the groves of academe have long since been cleared and have made way for vast grasslands with each blade of grass one of the 1 million scientific and scholarly articles our species secretes each year. And because this is how the nature of academic work is now ideologically defined and since it is the nature of ideology to distrust its subjects and to produce apparatuses monitoring their level of adherence to what is imposed on them as their nature, something is counting. One of the wonders of growth is of course that it lends itself so naturally to quantification: all that is required is adding things up and hey presto: more is more so whoever made more gets more to make more still. Or you die, but that is not an option, just a scandal.

All this, of course, is a caricature. The real picture is worse. For the one limit to growth which growth fundamentalism recognises as compatible with its commitment to limitlessness is competition. More is more and that's the law—but more in a place that is likely to lead to even more is better than more just anywhere at all. We enter the realm of second-order growth: the blade of grass must not just stand up and be counted, it must not just be seen, it must be seen to be seen—it must be cited. For each time it's cited it miraculously clones itself into a new, independently countable fact, and its genes will boldly go where no grass has gone before. It will flourish forever in the rich soil of Planet WoS. There's a WoK joke here I will leave uncooked while the bean-counting continues and the facts add up and more really is better but only when it is really more and can be quantified into a higher impact factor.

Enough ranting. The second-order caricature I have sketched here obviously fails to do justice to the real practices of scholars and scientists today, all of them (give or take) committed to producing their best approximations of something that is or feels true, and expected to release those approximations in the formats and through the transmission channels that discipline their disciplines. What I have sketched so far is an arrogant, jaded and resentful view from nowhere, deeply complicit with the fetishisation of quantifiable fact it pretends to indict. But it is also a symptom of a certain anxiety with a specific etiology leading back to a real problem involving disparities between different academic disciplines. Let's call them the sciences and the humanities for short—we all know how complicated these distinctions are. In the sciences scientists deal with facts, in the humanities scholars deal with bits of writing. Enough said.

Growth fundamentalism and institutionalised distrust are facts of life—i.e. successful ideologies—, and therefore require at least a double response: principled defiance (or grumbling) and adaptation. In the current climate, scientists grumble more than they need to adapt, and scholars need to adapt more than they can afford to grumble.

To illustrate the plight of research in the humanities at the present time, here is a snapshot of a tiny section of the current climate: the Flemish government's special research budget allocation system on the basis of output indicators, currently under reconstruction. The full budget is a fixed sum distributed over the four principal players in Flanders (Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent and Leuven).

65% of this sum is allocated on the basis of diploma's awarded, staff numbers and other such convenient quantifiables.

The remaining 35% is allocated on the basis of publication output, and that's when things take a bleak turn.

Half of this 35% is immediately distributed on the basis of citations in ISI—and as Thomson Reuters is profoundly indifferent to representative coverage of the humanities, scholars barely get a look in here.

The remaining 50% of the 35% for publication output is reserved for actual publications,

but a staggering 85% of that remainder is again reserved for ISI-listed output.

It's hard to tell the insult from the injury, but the upshot is that publications in the humanities that are not picked up by Thomson Reuters, including the vast bulk of scholarly monographs and volumes of papers, have a 2.65% impact on the allocation of the full budget, while ISI-listed work corners 32.35%. If you happen to be a scholar, this is where you hang down your head, carry on regardless, or begin to whistle in the dark. Or all of the above.

Hanging down your head is boring, so let's skip that. Carrying on regardless is the default position: continuing your research to the best of your abilities etcetera. This is arguably the most honourable option, but it is not one that faces the predicament in terms that are useful to us here. So how do you whistle in the dark? I give two examples—the second will (finally) bring me to digital publishing.

VABB

15% of the component for first-order publications (as distinct from citations) in the Flemish research fund allocation is based on non-ISI listed work. That portion is an informed guess but it's not entirely clear to me what it's based on, so let's bracket that for now. The general point is that the system assumes that only 15% of everything published by Flemish academics is not picked up by ISI and sets aside 2.65% of the total budget to reward this output. In the terms set by the system (we're inside the system now, it's dark, we're whistling), the question is how to distribute that 2.65% of the total budget across the universities. One way is to just list the bulk total of anything non-ISI produced in the humanities in each university and divide the money accordingly. Another way is to screen the non-ISI output, filter out the stuff that shouldn't really count since it's not up to the equivalent of the standards maintained by ISI—whatever those standards and a fortiori their equivalent may be, but let's settle on peer review as bedrock—and see what happens. That's what I've been doing these past few months, as a member of the grandly named “Authoritative Panel of the Flemish Academic Bibliographic Index for the Human and Social Sciences”—a body appointed by the Flemish Minister for Economy, Enterprise, Science, Innovation, Foreign Trade and Growth Fundamentalism. As chair of the subpanel on literary studies, I received data on publications of researchers of all Flemish universities between 2000 and 2008 and had to decide, in consultation with my panel, on the quality of some 460 non-ISI-listed journals in which my peers had published. In the end we dismissed about half of the titles. Our list—which will be known as the VABB (and I spare you the guttural stutters unpacking this initialism)—has not yet been made public, for we now still intend to start ranking the titles we have retained and then need to go through a similar screening routine for books and chapters in books, which is not likely to be any easier. The good news is that as long as the list is under construction, we can still move with relative safety through the corridors of our faculty buildings—once it is released, I intend to stay well clear of lamp posts.

The important point to bear in mind here is that the principal effective point of the exercise is the distribution of a tiny fixed sum (7.5% of the money linked to publications and citations) over the four Flemish universities. At this stage there is no prospect of actually increasing the weight of non-ISI listed work in the allocation system. Yet the only reason why I, for one, agreed to participate in this frustrating and extremely time-consuming process is precisely that: to prove to the scientists that scholars, too, can set and maintain standards—that, in fact, we can do it ourselves, without the aid of profit-driven information traders. All of this in the possibly naïve but life- and ultimately death-affirming hope that the crippling ISI-bias in the present system may one day be at least partly adjusted.

The price to be paid for this is the certain dismay of many colleagues who will find their contributions to scholarship scorned. The further risk is of course that the absolute volume of publications included in the VABB will turn out to be less than the 15% of total academic publication output guesstimated under the current dispensation. But there is also an obvious threat to the survival of journals—some of them excellent—that now place fine pieces by academics which lift their profile but will surely see those contributions dwindle in the future—unless the valorisation of scholarly work in non-ISI-listed publications which are included in the VABB is such that scholars can continue to devote time and energy to work that is not thus valorised.

(I throw in a side-point for discussion here: the recently announced successor assessment procedure to the Research Assessment Exercise in the UK, the so-called Research Excellence Framework, is moving away from publication and citation output indicators in favour of what is somewhat mysteriously referred to as “impact”, which seems to involve any kind of impression researchers make on anyone or anything just as long as it is not one of their peers. This may be of interest to collection builders: the half-thought you may have been entertaining that perhaps libraries should cancel subscriptions to humanities journals that are not recognised as scholarly by the venerable bodies judging their stakeholders may well be even more badly wrong than it probably already was, for in the new order it may well be publications blissfully untroubled by peer review that have the biggest impact factor in terms of budget allocation.)

OHP

But let’s stick to the present state of affairs, and let us suppose for a moment that the VABB is finalised and implemented as a tool for research budget allocation. A substantial amount of publications by scholars in the humanities will be effectively discounted. Assuming average rational compliance and roughly equal effort, a sizeable body of publications in progress will have to be channelled elsewhere. The approved journals will be under even more pressure than they already are to process submissions, and there will be an increase in rejections of manuscripts, many of which will not even make it to the stage of peer review and will instead be dismissed by whoever opens the attachment—if they open it. Journals will in all likelihood become even less inclined than they are now to accept difficult, demanding, risky writing—spoilt for choice by a growing number of fundamentally conformist routine contributions. And with such a demand for print space, subscriptions fees are not likely to come down any time soon, while the creation of new scholarly print journals to absorb the excess supply makes little business sense given the fact that library budgets can’t even afford subscriptions to what’s already there. If such is indeed the vicious scenario, and I think it is, it is time we took control of the means of reproduction. Which brings me to Open Humanities Press.

Open Humanities Press was invented 5 years ago in the fringe of a conference we organised at the University of Ghent. Its prime mover is Sigi Jöttkandt, who teamed up with Gary Hall and others to formally launch the initiative in 2008. The principal goal was to address the crisis in humanities publishing by catching up with the open access culture already achieved in the sciences, and this primarily meant solving the credibility problem crippling open access in the humanities—a problem the sciences can more easily pay to go away by means of a variety of business models involving author-side fees, institutional funding, and industrial strength, all of them involving money, the lack of which got us here in the first place.

The simple answer was to set up OHP as a volunteer-editor-driven portal for existing OA journals which could submit themselves for accreditation by a board of internationally credible scholars whose joint verdict should count as an equivalent to ISI-recognition. For free. Acceptance by OHP means a journal has been vetted by reliable scholars in its field as to the quality of its contributions and to the soundness of its own internal procedures, including peer review. The process is quite

straightforward: an annually rotating editorial oversight group is selected from the wider editorial board and engages in a wiki-based reviewing process of journals submitted for accreditation. The steering group monitors the reviewing and proposes a decision which is then submitted for approval. So far, we have 11 journals on our list, and soon there will be a new batch.

Apart from communicating this accreditation to the scholarly community, the core issue now is to have it recognised by funding allocation bodies, and this is where libraries can also begin to play a more prominent part. A very simple instance: if library portals would list OHP next to, say, Project Muse or JSTOR, that in itself would already add to the credibility it deserves. Leuven University's library, I'm happy and grateful to say, did exactly that within 24 hours of my request to that effect. OHP journals are now part of Leuven Library's collection at no cost to anyone, to the benefit of all, not least the users of the library who trust the paths laid out for them by their librarians.

But librarians can make a much bigger difference still in teaming up with outfits like OHP to address the crisis in monograph publication. OHP had not initially planned to take this route, but it quickly turned out to be the obvious thing to do. In 2009, an agreement was reached with the University of Michigan Library's Scholarly Publishing Office. "Between us, we're developing a model where international scholars coalesce around areas of interest through a book series and perform the editorial oversight, manuscript selection and development for that series, often with their own internal editorial boards and consulting editors. The Scholarly Publishing Office then takes the finished manuscript and runs it through their suite of publishing services to produce OHP's finished online, print on demand and, eventually also, epub books."¹ So far we have set up 5 OHP book series and we're planning to release 5 monographs this year and double that number next year.

And if it all works out, perhaps the punitive subscription fees to mainstream scholarly journals and databases will come down in the face of successful open access competition and we will finally be able to stock our libraries with 'ordinary' books again as well. And not before time—a final fact to cheer us all up: the library budget for English literature here at Leuven the past few years has been such that after paying our various subscriptions fees we are left with a sum that will buy us an average of minus 2 books per year.

1 http://openhumanitiespress.org/Jottkandt_13-10-09_LIANZA.pdf