
Publishing in the right place or publishing the right thing: journal targeting and citations' strategies for promotion and tenure committees

Michael Segalla

Department of Management and Human Resources,
HEC School of Management, Paris, 78351 Jouy en Josas, France
E-mail: segalla@hec.fr

Biographical notes: Michael Segalla is Associate Professor of Management at HEC School of Management. He has taught Management, Human Resource, Organisational Behaviour, and Industrial Relations at McGill University in Montreal, City University of New York in New York City, and was a faculty member of the City University of New York – Cornell University Masters of Science in Industrial Relations. He was a visiting scholar at the ILO in Geneva in 1985 and a visiting professor at the University of Florida in 1998–99. In 1991 he was awarded a Franco-American Commission (Fulbright) for Education Exchange Inter-foundation Grant. In 2001 he was the winner of the AESC Best Management Research Award for his article entitled 'Making cross-cultural research relevant to European corporate integration'. In 2003 he created, in cooperation with Ernst&Young – France, the 'Best in France Annual Prize'. The Prize, sponsored by Citigroup, Ernst&Young, Fedex, and SAS Institute rewards the work of HEC students who prepared case studies examining how foreign companies adapt to the French legal, tax, and cultural environment.

A commentary about a status quo is destined to create discord. Defending existing order rarely gives the erstwhile author credit from the disfavoured. Criticising status quo rarely pleases existing beneficiaries. But it is a necessary task from time to time and serves as a reminder that even the best intentioned remedies to any problem can veer off course and create unintended consequences. Organisation and management research is facing this situation.

Over the past decades business schools have experienced an increasing demand for their diplomas. The business press noticed and set about ranking these programmes. These rankings measured many factors including: career advancement, student and faculty diversity, graduate satisfaction, pre and post salary levels, admission selectivity, industry connections, teaching quality and research productivity. Product rankings provide an important service to the consumer. They consolidate information to help consumers make informed and perhaps better, choices. Firms can use ranking to improve and differentiate their products and services.

Business schools responded to improve their rankings. This included: creating a broader range of diplomas (i.e. executive, international, part-time, etc.), employing more career placement personnel, hiring personable, media savvy deans, recruiting students from regions where salaries are low and placing graduates in areas where they are high, increasing the diversity of students and faculty, hiring faculty with

doctorates, and promoting the publication of scientific research in 'high quality' journals. These actions are the rational responses of executives (i.e. deans) seeking to meet client demand. This paper will focus on the last bit of policy prescription, namely to publish in 'high quality' journals. It is here where certain perverse effects of the business school ranking system are apparent.

Publishing success appears easy to measure and, like ratings of car safety or drug effectiveness, it often appears very compelling. An appropriate starting point for this discussion is the university research committee. Typically this committee evaluates faculty research and makes recommendations concerning the granting of tenure or promotion. The problems of separating academic from journalistic scholarship and rigorous theory building/testing from the slapdash variety are not inconsequential. The research committee might not include experts from all academic domains. The likelihood that members will spend days or weeks understanding the literature of any particular domain in order to fairly evaluate a colleague's contribution to the field is low. Fortunately article citations are quantifiable and increasingly accessible. One can easily assume that highly cited articles must offer important contributions to a field's scholars. The quantity of citations is also highly differentiating. One might safely conclude that business schools, like their student clients, are well served by this unambiguous data.

To examine this assertion empirically a citation dataset was constructed using Harzing's Publish or Perish (PoP) software.¹ This programme queries Google Scholar and parses out academic citations measuring both author and journal impact. The search parameters were limited to documents published since 1990 in the top five, peer-reviewed, general management, academic journals.² Nearly ten thousand cited documents were initially returned. This data were cleaned of as many extraneous, undated, garbled, or clearly subordinate documents (e.g. editorials, book reviews, special issue introductions, etc.), as possible. A total of 7,518 documents were retained for further analysis. Among these between 1,987 and 2,213 were apparent duplicates, each with a separate citation count.³ Using the most stringent duplicate identification algorithm, the citation counts of the documents were aggregated, leaving 5,530 articles for further analysis. To independently verify this count, another journal/article database was queried.⁴ It indicates that 4,274 articles were published in these journals during this period. This suggests that the PoP/Google Scholar derived database over counts the number of articles, probably because of inaccurate bibliographic information and the inclusion of subordinate documents. Thirty five percent of the articles were cited five times or less (including self citations). Eight percent of the articles were cited more than 200 times, while 8% were never cited. The average article is cited 70 times (SD 167). The most cited article (5,441) is by Cohen and Levinthal (1990).

Even with these sophisticated tools, developing accurate citation counts are difficult. So what is the typical school likely to do in this dilemma? They might follow the lead of companies that restrict recruiting to certain schools, essentially relying on the school to select and train appropriate quality employees. The research committee equivalent of this strategy is to use journal acceptance as a proxy for research quality. It is difficult to shepherd an article through the process of acceptance by the editors of a peer-reviewed journal. Journal acceptance, therefore, appears to reflect the kind of hard data used by the crash or drug testing industries. It is almost unassailable. The article was published or not. But publication is not enough to ensure the quality of scholarly contribution. Some editorial review committees and editors might be

more or less exacting during the review process. Fortunately rankings of journal quality are available. Harzing's PoP software offers over ten ranking indicators and Thomson's ISI Journal Citation Report (JCR) has a long history in academia.⁵

These journal quality ranking tools should make the onerous job of evaluating academic contribution easier and less uncontroversial. Both tools, however, have important limitations. Harzing's PoP queries Google Scholar which in turn queries the web. The web is a public database, where information is not certified as accurate or structured unambiguously. This leads to the many reporting problems discussed earlier. Thomson's JCR is more accurate but is based on a very short (two year or five year) measurement period and rates certain kinds of publications higher than others, depending on the size of their bibliographies.⁶ Thomson specifically cautions against a mechanical use of the JCR: 'The impact factor should not be used without careful attention to the many phenomena that influence citation rates ...'⁷

Another problem, apart from article or journal citation measurement, is a self-imposed limitation on the number of acceptable publication outlets. In some ways the group of the most prestigious, peer-reviewed business journals resembles an oligarchy. In the area of general management, there are five or six journals, generally acknowledged to be members of the oligarchy.⁸ This is not a critique of the editors or editorial committees. Rather, it is an observation that researchers collectively created and continue to sustain the existence of a limited group of publishing outlets. What is the role of these journals? From a market-based perspective they provide an information exchange service. They assist widely dispersed researchers to share ideas and information concerning important issues in their fields. In this respect, paper journals are an anachronism, given that modern digital telecommunication has largely displaced print as a medium for information exchange. This point aside, they developed reputations for carefully reviewing submitted articles and became a trusted source of information. However, the number of publishers 'widely acknowledged' as offering high quality assessments of a research paper's scholarly contribution is small, given the increasing demand by researchers. In Figure 1 the frequency (log) of published management articles⁹ in over 3,700 peer-reviewed academic journals covered by the Business Source Complete¹⁰ database is compared to the frequency (log) of all articles published by the five top general management journals.

Notice that, despite the 400% increase in published articles, the supply of publishing opportunities in the top five journals did not increase. Economic theories suggest that market supply should eventually meet market demand. This is clearly not occurring, since a ten year decline in the number of articles published in the top five journals is evident (Figure 2).

There are several consequences to this apparent market failure. The first is that it appears increasingly difficult to gain tenure and promotion in numerically driven research evaluation systems. When promotion and tenure committees no longer take the time to read the work of their colleagues – instead relying on proxies for research quality – it is paramount that the externalised evaluations be fair and robust. Few cumulative data are available on the global trends in tenure and promotion. But the evidence suggests that tenure and promotion decisions cannot be made fairly, using only numerical citation or publication counts. Typical citation counting is too inaccurate and there are too few pages available in the top journals to keep up with the publishing demands. What good comes from exacting research demands early in a researcher's career if they are eventually waved aside during the tenure process?

Figure 1 Frequency (log) of management articles across all journal (light grey) and five top journals (dark grey)

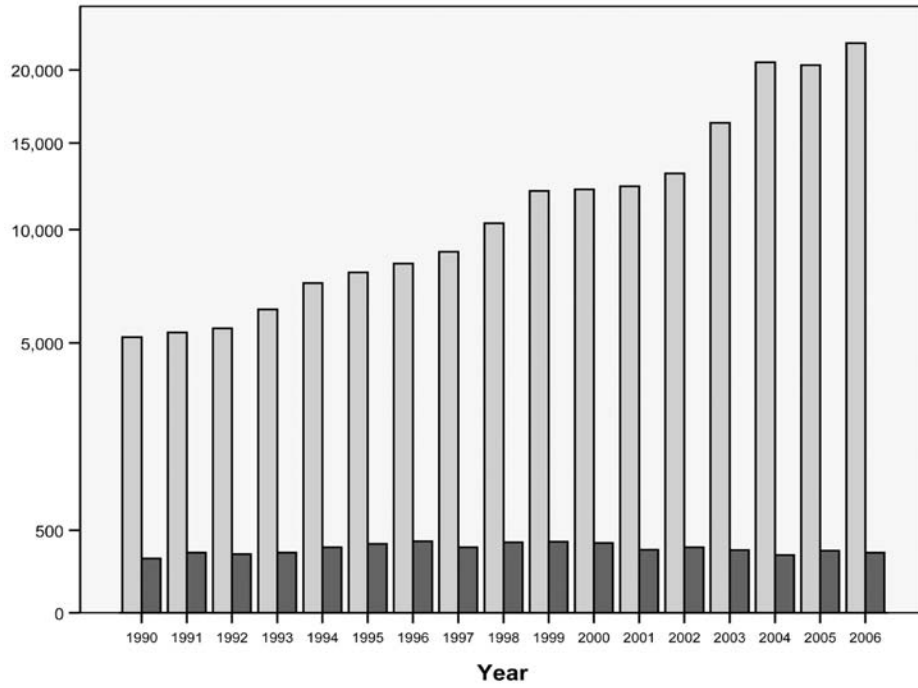
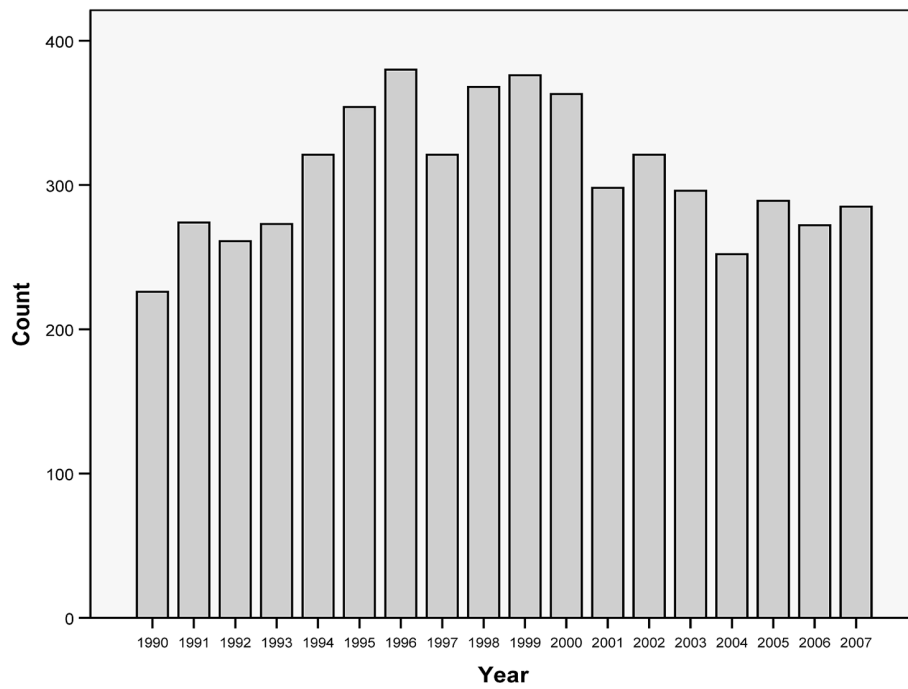


Figure 2 Number of articles published in the top five general management journals



From a different perspective one might speculate that less time spent worrying about publishing in the 'right' journal can actually increase a researcher's productivity and leave extra time to improve pedagogical skills.

The second consequence, and one of direct interest to editors of new academic journals, is that our industry is failing to meet market demands for 'widely-acknowledged' high quality publishing outlets. Whether quality standards are indeed lax among lower ranking journals is a question that should be seriously studied. Many established and newly created journals promise very high review standards. Their editorial boards include many rigorous and experienced researchers. Are we undervaluing this resource? This is a serious question because it suggests that the market place may not be working correctly. When safe cars became important to commuters, most car manufacturers did their best to satisfy the demand of their clients. What are we doing to satisfy our own demands for independent, unbiased evaluations of our academic contributions? We need to be more open and inclusive about adding journals to our alpha, beta, gamma lists. As we hire more high quality, well-trained scholars, we must offer them more approved outlets for their work. Maintaining, or in some cases increasing, demands of a certain number of alpha publications to ensure tenure without a corresponding increase in publication potential does not insure better scholarship. Why should we accept a declining probability to actually publish our work with the assurances of a high quality, double-blind review process?

The third consequence is that we are overloading our leading generalist managerial journals with too many submissions. Editors and reviewers are increasingly besieged to review the exploding number of article submissions. This leads to a longer review process and overloads the volunteers that support the academic review system. It will be increasingly difficult to maintain the traditional standard of three reviewers, which threatens the integrity of the process.

Many of these articles would be better appreciated, published more quickly, and perhaps have more impact if they were published in specialised journals. However, because these journals tend to have lower citation impact, or are less well known, they are avoided by young researchers trying to build an impressive promotion file. This is an understandable strategy, but one that ultimately slows the diffusion of ideas into the research literature and stifles academic dialogue. Perversely, it works against the normal functioning of the market place, by discouraging the expansion of the top group of journals. Limiting supply to boost prestige might be an appropriate strategy for expensive handbags or fashionable nightclubs. But is it right for the exchange of scholarly thought and the hiring of business school professors?

In the end, the real losers of this market failure will be business students whose professors are distracted by the pressures of publishing articles, rather than helping them understand the business and economic environment and giving them the tools to manage firms better. Too much time is being wasted publishing in the right place rather than publishing the right thing.

Reference

- Cohen, W.M. and Levinthal, D.A. (1990) 'Absorptive capacity: a new perspective on learning and innovation', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Special Issue: Technology, Organizations, and Innovation (March), pp.128–152.
- Mingers, J. and Harzing, A-W. (2007) 'Ranking journals in business and management: a statistical analysis of the Harzing Dataset', *European Journal of Information Systems*, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp.303–316.

Notes

- ¹ Publish or Perish, version 2.4.2894. www.harzing.com
- ² The period was chosen to correspond with the SOM – University of Texas at Dallas dataset of top journal articles and because Harzing's PoP cites evidence that pre-1990 web searches are more often erroneous compared to post 1990 searches. The journals are: *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science* and *Strategic Management Journal*. To overcome the Google Scholar imposed a search limit of 1000 items, 17 individual searches were made, each limited to a one year period.
- ³ Three matching criteria were used separately
- ⁴ The School of Management, University of Texas at Dallas, maintains a database of all articles published.
- ⁵ <http://scientific.thomson.com/free/essays/journalcitationreports/impactfactor/>.
- ⁶ Thomson offers advice about how to use its citation impact analysis including several variations for two year, five year, self-citation exclusions and journal title changes.
- ⁷ <http://scientific.thomson.com/free/essays/journalcitationreports/impactfactor/>.
- ⁸ The University of Texas at Dallas database includes: *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, *Strategic Management Journal* and the *Journal of International Business Studies*. Minger and Harzing (2007) place the *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, and *Strategic Management Journal* in a 'top 30' list. *The Financial Times* list of journals includes all of these two sets, plus the *Management International Review*.
- ⁹ To enumerate this total effectively, the search was constrained to nine subject terms (strategy or organisation or management or firm or strategic or business or manager or executive or organisation) and several limiters (Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals; Document Type: Article; Publication Type: Academic Journal; Publication Type: Journal Article). This biases the results toward the underreporting of the total number of managerial articles published. For the five top journals the figures are exact.
- ¹⁰ Business Source Complete is a bibliographical database service owned by EBSCO Information Services, www.ebsco.com.