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A Pro-Active Model of Journal Editing

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Buckley (2020) proposes a measure of editorial ‘skill’ and ‘error’, based on two factors: whether an editor accepts or rejects a paper, and whether or not citations to this paper are higher than the citations of an average paper in that journal (= its impact factor). In this model, an editor’s biggest achievement is to publish papers with high citation potential. The biggest failure is to let other journals publish such papers by rejecting them.

Buckley’s model assumes: (1) that citations are an objective measure of the merit of a study, and (2) that the editor’s sole aim is to maximize the journal’s impact factor. We argue that both premises are incorrect, highlight how Buckley’s viewpoint reflects a false but increasing tendency to assess academic research using scientometrics, and question fundamentally Buckley’s reactive model of journal editing.

Firstly, citations do not represent an objective measure of merit (MacRoberts & MacRoberts, 2010). Articles can attract high numbers of citations for many reasons: they make an outstanding contribution to the field; they review a field of research, offering other authors substantial time savings when writing literature reviews in their own articles (e.g. Pike, 2002); they contain a statistic used in many other studies (e.g. that tourism generates ~8% of greenhouse emissions; Lenzen *et al.*, 2018); or they are mis-cited (e.g. Dolnicar & Grün (2008) show why factor-cluster analysis should not be used, yet are sometimes cited in support of this method).

Secondly, editors do not aim solely to increase the journal’s impact factor. Of course, each journal editor has their own motivations and priorities, but we assume most of our editor colleagues are, like us, are driven to a large degree by idealistic motivations, and are humbled by the opportunity to serve their academic community. Not surprisingly, therefore, it was journal editors who initiated the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (2020) – now signed by 1863 organisations and over 15000 individuals. At the core of this declaration stands a commitment to “assess research on its own merits”, rather than relying on journal impact factors.

Buckley’s analysis is predicated on a model of the editor in a passive, reactive editorial role where editors are presented with a set of manuscripts and – based on this pool of articles only – make publication decisions. In Buckley’s model, editors do not influence the type of papers submitted to their journals. We subscribe to a more pro-active model of journal editing. Editors influence the nature of submissions in at least two ways: (1) by carefully selecting what they publish. Published articles are the most powerful signal of a journal’s orientation. (2) By using other avenues – writing editorials, presenting at conferences, and communicating with authors and colleagues about the journal’s priorities, aims and policies.

When we inherited the editorship of *Annals*, we deliberately chose a proactive editorial model. We agreed on what we wanted to achieve during our tenure. Like any reputable journal, we want articles published in *Annals* to be credible (the research design must permit valid and reliable conclusions). We also want articles to be relevant (to explain the value of the study to policy, industry, and the community). But for us as editors it is most important that we publish courageous new research. We want to see bold new ideas. We want authors to take risks, push boundaries. Getting truly courageous work published in an inherently conservative reviewing environment is quite challenging (and can reduce the journal impact factor). Yet, this is how we feel we can best serve our academic community. We do not want to administer the processing of manuscripts in a mechanistic review process. We want to use our tenure as the editors of *Annals* to shape the future of tourism research – hand in hand with our associate editors, reviewers and authors. We communicate this vision widely (please see the guide for authors: <https://www.elsevier.com/journals/annals-of-tourism-research/0160-7383/guide-for-authors>). Whilst we recognise that some Higher Education systems – particularly in South Korea, Japan, China, and Taiwan – do rely on scientometrics as the main benchmark of research quality creating an ‘SSCI syndrome’ (SSCI stands for the Social Sciences Citation Index) (Wang 2014), our role as editors is to ensure that the merit of a piece of research always trumps its citability in our decision making. We view it as our biggest achievement to publish a paper that presents genuine originality. We view it as our biggest failure if we reject such a paper. If our pro-active editing of *Annals* happens to increase the journal’s impact fact, that would be a happy coincidence.

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