The Politics of Indexing and Ranking Academic Journals

The *ACME* Editorial Collective[1]

As part of a recent application to Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for funding to support publication of *ACME*,[2] the journal's editorial collective was required to provide information on "impact measures" for the journal as well as information on the indexes and journal aggregators that list *ACME*. The SSHRC instructions stated simply:

> Provide information on impact measures (or, in the absence of any third-party impact measures, describe the impact your journal has had). Identify the individual indexes and journal aggregators in which the journal is listed. (SSHRC, 2007, 6)

At first blush, these instructions are pretty straightforward, but on further reflection — and put in their wider context – it becomes clear that there are some rather significant politics at play within these seemingly simple requests for mere "technical" information (Berg, 2006; Paasi, 2005; Sheppard, 2006).

The problematic character of impact measures was reinforced for us when, as a result of our SSHRC application, we recently considered submitting an application to include *ACME* in the widely used ISI Web of Science journal index. Our intention was to increase the exposure of *ACME* to students and members of the academic community. However, our objective was to have the journal indexed in ISI, but *not* included in what we see as the onerous system of journal rankings

---

(by "impact factor"), undertaken by ISI Web of Science.[3] Discussions with staff at Thomson Scientific (the private corporation that owns the ISI Web of Science) soon made it clear that inclusion in their journal index cannot be separated from the production of an impact factor, and thus inclusion in a problematic league table of Geography journals. Given the political stance of our editorial collective, as well as the editorial policy of *ACME,* we decided not to apply for inclusion in the index.[4]

This brings us squarely back to the question of the politics of indexing and ranking journals. We have numerous reservations with the political implications of impact measures and their use in ranking of journals. We want to focus on just three of our reservations here:

i) the way such measures are now key to the *governmentality* (after Foucault, 1988) of neoliberalizing academia;
ii) the way such measures performatively (after Butler, 1990) *constitute* the international scale that they are purported to simply describe; and,
iii) the way such measures are cementing new forms of hierarchy in the everyday lives of academic geographers (and others).

We briefly discuss these problems below.

Impact factors and journal rankings are now commonplace terms in the working lives of academic geographers. This is because they have become an important component of what Michel Foucault (1988) termed "governmentality", or the governance of individuals from afar. The techniques of governmentality disguise as mere technical processes a set of highly political neoliberalizing practices – in this case, journal ranking based on impact factors – designed to ensure that the work of academics aligns with the objectives of the institutions in which they work. Academics are thus being asked to become responsible for the increasingly capitalist-like accumulation strategies of universities, and one way of ensuring that they do so is through the disciplining practices of impact factors and journal ranking systems (see Berg, 2006).

---

[3] For a description of the calculation of impact factors, see Garfield, no date.

[4] Not unproblematically, *ACME* is currently indexed in the following indexes and aggregators: Directory of Open Access Journals (www.DOAJ.org);   Google Scholar (scholar.google.com);   International   Bibliography   of   the   Social   Sciences (www.lse.ac.uk/collections/IBSS/); Open Access (www.openaccess-germany.de); Scopus (Elsevier); and, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory (www.ulrichsweb.com). Leaving aside the significant controversy over Reed-Elsevier and its involvement in Defense Exhibitions, Scopus is Elsevier's response to ISI Web of Science, and thus it engages in ranking by impact factors as well.

Within a hegemonic (read: 'scientific') discourse of academic journal ranking, impact factors and ranking are assumed to measure the international stature of academic journals. Thus, ISI Web of Science rankings have become important in institutional assessments of the international stature of journals, and by extension, the international stature of authors who publish in such journals (Berg, 2006; Paasi, 2005; Sheppard, 2006). Unfortunately, there seems to be little empirical relationship between journals implicitly defined as 'international' by ISI Web of Science and the 'international' character of journals themselves (Gutiérrez and López-Nieva, 2001). Rather, we might better understand that rankings and impact factors are performative (after Butler, 1990), in that they bring into being the very international character that they purport to merely describe (also see Berg, 2004). We like to think that *ACME*, with *open-access* publication in *five languages*, has a commitment to international scholarship without submitting itself to the calculative desire of audit performed by scholarly journal ranking corporations such as Thomson Scientific.

Chris Shore and Susan Wright (2000) have identified a new and more intensive form of "coercive accountability" that has arisen within the spaces of academic knowledge production in the United Kingdom (and elsewhere too). This coercive accountability involves at its heart a reliance upon journal impact factor and ranking data to evaluate the "quality" of scholarship produced by individual academics (and at the aggregate level, via the Research Assessment Exercise, the quality of the aggregate scholarly production of their institutional budget units). Based on what we hear from our UK colleagues, this coercive accountability has created a great deal of anxiety and dissatisfaction and has instilled a destructive competitive spirit in the university system. Our desire to avoid ranking comes in part from a commitment to avoid feeding this kind of competition among colleagues.

Staff at Thomson Scientific acknowledged having heard of some of these problems and assured us that "All members of Thomson Scientific (back to the early days of the Institute for Scientific Information founded by Gene Garfield) encourage the appropriate and knowledgeable use of the [Journal Citation Reports] data."[5] While we appreciate the position that academic scholarship and publication should only be used appropriately, we also believe that the impact factor and journal ranking are not the suitable means to achieve this aim.

Instead, and in the spirit of appropriate and responsible use of the material published in *ACME*, we ask our readers to become active participants in helping to promote the journal to its intended audience through word-of-mouth and other –

---

[5] Personal communication between Harald Bauder and a senior Thomson Scientific employee, 21 May 2007 (Also see Garfield, no date).

perhaps more wide-ranging – means.   As the only open-access journal dedicated to publication of high-quality work in critical geography, *ACME* provides an alternative mode for knowledge production and distribution. As an alternative to corporate publishing houses, we believe the non-capitalist, open-access, and multi-lingual model used by *ACME* aligns nicely with most critical geographers' own political orientation towards more egalitarian ways of operating in the world.

References

Berg, Lawrence D. 2006. Hierarchical space: Geographers and neoliberalism. *Progress in Human Geography* 30(6), 764-769 and 778-782.

Berg, Lawrence D. 2004. Scaling knowledge: Towards a *critical geography* of critical geography. *GeoForum* 35(5), 553-558.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Foucault, Michel. 1988. Technologies of the self. In, L. H. Martin, H. Gutman & P. H. Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

Garfield, Eugene. No date. The Thomson Scientific Impact Factor. Available online: http://scientific.thomson.com/free/essays/journalcitationreports/impactfactor/ (accessed 15 October, 2007).

Gutiérrez, J. and P. López-Nieva. 2001. Are international journals of human geography really international? *Progress in Human Geography* 25, 53-69.

Paasi, Annsi. 2005. Globalisation, academic capitalism, and the uneven geographies of international journal publishing spaces. *Environment and Planning A* 37, 769-89.

Sheppard, Eric. 2006. Geographies of research assessment: The neoliberalization of geography?" *Progress in Human Geography* 30(6), 761-764 and 778-782.

Shore, Chris and Susan Wright. 2000. Coercive accountability: The rise of audit culture in higher education. In, M. Strathern (ed.), *Audit Cultures,* London: Routledge, pp. 57-89.

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. 2007. Aid to Open-Access Research Journals Grant Application Instructions. Available online: http://www.sshrc.ca (accessed 20 June, 2007).