

CHAPTER 3

Recycling of Published Academic Texts: An Introduction to the Issue

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Abstract: This paper is based on identification of instances where a version of a scientific paper has been recycled into a what is presented as a new paper. The process of recycling is time-consuming for both authors and readers, but recycled papers do not add new scientific knowledge. This paper discusses some anonymous cases and proposes a method for further research.

Keywords: recycling, academic texts, scientific work, academic contribution

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1. Introduction

New Public Management (NPM) has become a model for organizing and governing activities in the public sector, as well as activities operating within the frame of the public sector. A good example of the latter would be organizations responsible for higher education and research, i.e. universities. NPM has entered the global university arena and most universities utilize the model applying organizational performance control and participating in national and international benchmarking. Consequently NPM exists on different levels, the organizational and social, in the world of organizations whose legitimacy is based on the exploration and exploitation (March, 1991) of knowledge.

The public sector, in almost all countries around the globe, has since the 1980s been involved in a dramatic change, see e.g. Olson, Guthrie and Humphrey (1998) for an overview. The change has been labeled New Public Management (NPM), or New Public Financial Management (NPFM), in order to illustrate the financial dimension of the change. Two quite prominent characteristics of NPM are the focus on monitoring performance and then evaluating it. Universities and colleges are not exceptions even though some of them in some countries may be privately owned.

In a scientific context NPM has led to a strong focus on the volume of scientific publications and incentive mechanisms coupled to the publications' volume of performance. This reform has probably improved scientific competence in many universities, but it has also had some unintended consequences.

In my career as a scholar I have sometimes come across academic texts, which were very similar to earlier texts produced by the same author. I have labeled this phenomenon the recycling of academic texts. Consequently the new publication may not necessarily develop more knowledge. As I understand it, this is an unintended consequence of New Public Management (NPM) in an academic context. The phenomenon of recycling has not been explicitly discussed in the literature, and therefore the purpose of this chapter is to present the problem. The chapter is, at this stage of the research, more illustrative than deductive and analytical.

2. The basic activities of a university

The activities of a university are often structured into the following three groups:

Education

Research

Management and Administration

These activities are certainly interrelated. Management and administration are supposed to manage and support education and research. Scientific competence is often seen as an important indication of the quality of education. In an NPM context, education and research are increasingly monitored and evaluated, both by national authorities and by international organizations.

Evaluations may focus on education and research individually or together. The evaluation varies according to the organizational level, e.g. evaluating university-wide activities or an individual educational program. It may include rankings, accreditations and performance based revenues.

Evaluations focus primarily on the core activities of universities, i.e. research and education, but sometimes the management of these activities is also included. All evaluations may have direct or indirect effects on the revenues of the university, and they are therefore given a lot of attention by the management of the actual academic organization.

When ranking, academic institutions (either as a whole or choosing disaggregated activities, e.g. an educational program) are compared to each other and ranked. Rankings may therefore provide information to financiers, e.g. potential donors, other financiers like the government, and potential students about which universities are the best according to the criteria used in the ranking.

Accreditation is different than ranking. Accreditation is used to compare a university, or a program, to a norm decided by the accreditation organization.

All universities may be included in rankings independently of whether they are accredited or not, and there is no guarantee that an accredited university or a program will achieve a high ranking.

Performance based evaluation is primarily related to revenues for the education of students, e.g. the volume of graduated students, but it is also to an increasing extent used in order to finance research, e.g. the volume of published scientific articles.

Research is a vital part of all universities and therefore plays an important role in their evaluation, and consequently has a considerable impact on the revenues of a university. First, ranking and accreditation may have both a direct and an indirect impact on revenues, and second, performance based research revenues have a direct impact on revenues. Further, in some cases the salary of the individual scholar is dependent on the volume and quality of his/her publications. Consequently there are various types of pressure on the university organization to encourage scholars to publish, and this pressure is transmitted to the individual scholars.

The mantra is, “Publish or perish!” Individual scholars also struggle to reach high levels in the organizational, national or international hierarchy of the academic elite. Consequently there are incentives for both the individual scholar and the university to increase the volume of publications. This has certainly been the norm for a long time, but NPM has probably pushed the norm further. I label therefore this model as the publication-incentive model. Furthermore, research may thus be classified on various levels of quality, often measured through the ranking of journals and books. This means that some journals or publishers are viewed as better than others to publish in. A simple model of publications is presented in the next section.

3. A simple model of publications

Research activities always precede publication, and publication often generates new research, which in the next step generates new publications. In the rest of this chapter I will focus on the publication process. This process usually includes two steps: the publication of a working paper (WP), and the publication of an article or a chapter in a book (A/C).

The publication process may be viewed as a stream in which different versions of the research report are published. The WP may be regarded

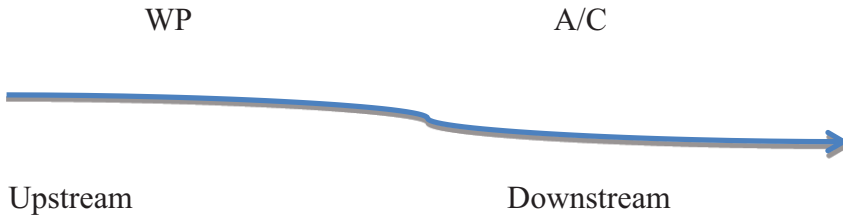


Figure 1 Illustration of publication along the stream.

as an upstream publication, while the A/C may be regarded as a downstream publication. In this way the research is published twice, in the WP and in the A/C.

In some cases the WP may also have two or three versions, which may be somewhat similar. I view a PhD thesis in itself as an early downstream publication. It may actually contain published articles or essays and chapters, which later may become articles in scientific journals.

There is usually a difference between the upstream publication and the downstream publication, simply because the idea of presenting and publishing a WP is to get reactions to the text, and reactions from readers of the WP often generate changes in the text of the WP.

Scientific publications may, as indicated above, be divided into three main groups of publications and some sub-groups:

Working papers

First version working papers (WPF)

Working papers in university WP-series (WPU)

Working papers in conference-series (WPC)

Articles

Articles in scientific journals (SJ)

Articles in professional journals (PJ)

Scientific book, e.g. a PhD thesis

Chapters in anthologies, edited or non-edited, (EA, NEA)

Monographs (M)

Each category may be ranked in some way.

There is often a distinction made between WPF and WPU on the one hand and WPC on the other, simply because the acceptance of a WP to be presented at a scientific conference signals that the paper has some good qualities.

Scientific journals are often ranked, through either national rankings or ad hoc rankings. The British Association of Business Schools (ABS) is an example of a national association, which ranks scientific journals within the business domain, e.g. accounting, management, finance, economics, etc. The ABS group divides journals within each discipline into four grades (1–4), where 4 is the highest. The selection of journals to be graded means that some scientific journals are not included. The ABS has selected 35 accounting journals to be included and ranked, and the number of journals on the level of 4 varies, as shown below.

Grade 4: 5 journals

Grade 3: 16 journals

Grade 2: 9 journals

Grade 1: 5 journals

The individual publisher of scientific books also indicates something about the quality of the scientific text, since some publishers, e.g. Oxford University Press, are informally viewed as better than others.

The description above shows that all scientific texts are embedded in some type of evaluation system independent of the actual text.

The most respected publishers control some of the scientific journals and books. The rest of the publishing system is consequently controlled by less respected publishers.

3.1 Modern Scientific Work

Scientific work includes both the research process and the publication of research. Modern scientific work means that a scientific text is published in various versions over time, smaller or larger parts of the text are consequently recycled. A published article in a scientific journal has often been presented at a local seminar at the university, and at one or two conferences in order to improve the text.

The implicit norm in the academic system is that scholars do not have to refer to earlier versions when a later version is published. This system of recycling texts is legitimized by the international academic system, including respected publishers and journals. It seems that the system has worked fairly well and there is no obvious reason to criticize it. Academic texts may, however, also be recycled in other ways. The basic idea of this paper is to discuss the recycling of academic texts, which are published twice as downstream publications, i.e. the recycling of texts in any direction between SJ, EA and M.

4. Method

In this section I will discuss the question of recycling academic accounting texts by using some anonymous cases. The ambition here is not to present a full analysis of the issue; the purpose is to present the recycling of downstream academic texts as a problem. I have therefore chosen three illustrative examples. Each case includes a presentation of publications, the number of authors and references to other publications in the case. A short analysis of the content of the involved publication is also made.

4.1 The cases

My first recognition of this issue was when I as a new and young professor. I was a member of an evaluation committee regarding a position as full professor. Since that evaluation I have encountered the problem in other contexts. In this paper I focus on 3 cases, which demonstrate various types of recycling.

Case 1. One set of empirical data and four working papers.

The case involves one scholar who applied for a professorship. The scholar had published four working papers (WPU) based on the same empirical data. There were variations regarding hypothesis, equations and results, but the variation between the papers was small. The applicant had other

academic merits, but he was not evaluated as having the scientific competence required to become a full professor. This case illustrates only upstream recycling.

Case 2. One case and three publications.

This is a complex case. One of the scholars in this case is an internationally known scholar (Scholar A). The other is a postdoc scholar (Scholar B). Publication 1 is the dissertation of scholar B. A WP (publication 2) was presented at a large international conference. It had only the name of Scholar A on the front page. The empirical data was a large case study, which was based on data presented in publication 1, but it did not refer to that publication. The analysis was structured by theory X, and conclusions were related to this theory. Publication 3 included two names (Scholar A and Scholar B). The paper included the same case as publication 2, and consequently also as publication 1, but the framework was, however, changed to theory Y. The conclusions were also changed, primarily because of the change in frame of reference. Both publications 2 and 3 may be classified as WPC. I have no information about what happened to the publications after the conference. It is quite possible that at least one of the publications has been published in a scientific journal. As a careful reader of both papers I wonder what knowledge publication 2 added to publication 1, and what knowledge publication 3 added to publications 1 and 2.

This case illustrates how the empirical data in one study, the PhD thesis, was recycled into two working papers. To recycle parts of a PhD thesis into a WP is rather unproblematic, but an explanation of the relationship between the publications was lacking. Consequently a discussion of the eventual additional contributions was also lacking. This process may be viewed as recycling an early downstream publication into two early downstream publications.

Case 3. One case and four publications.

This case involves one PhD thesis and three articles. The PhD thesis (the thesis) consists of four essays. Two essays are written by the PhD

candidate (Scholar A) and two essays have co-authors, one essay with scholar B (an internationally known scholar) and the other with scholar C (a nationally known scholar). One article (article 1) is based on one of the essays in the thesis and is published in an ABS₁ journal by scholars A and B. Two articles (articles 2 and 3) are published in what are regarded as good journals, one in an ABS₃ journal (article 2) and the other in an ABS₄ journal (article 3). None of the published articles refer to the PhD thesis or to each other. There are clear differences regarding the frame of reference and conclusions between article 1 on the one hand and articles 2 and 3 on the other. Article 1 is based on a clear functionalistic paradigm, while articles 2 and 3 are based on an interpretative paradigm. Articles 2 and 3 are very similar, although article 3 has a broader contextual perspective in the process studied. Consequently, it is difficult to find out what additional scientific contributions the articles present. This is especially problematic in regard to article 2 and article 3, i.e. publications in highly respected journals. This case illustrates how an early downstream publication can generate three downstream publications, among which two are articles in highly ranked ABS journals and one in a lower ranked ABS journal.

5. Short Analysis

The three cases illustrate a variation in publication practice, and that some scholars are willing to publish more than one publication based on a single research process.

It is easy to assume that recycling exists primarily in quantitative research built on data in databases or surveys, but this is wrong. Recycling also exists in case studies, like Case 2 and Case 3. Recycling of Case 2 resulted only in additionally two working papers, but recycling of Case 3 (C₃) resulted in three articles in ABS-ranked journals.

The three cases demonstrate that a genuine problem may exist within the publication-incentive model. The publication-incentive model may produce a lot of publications, but not necessarily a corresponding increase in knowledge, or understanding. Further, these cases clearly illustrate that recycling of academic texts is not only an upstream phenomenon, it

also exists in downstream publications, as well as in what are regarded as the best journals, e.g. ABS3 and ABS4 journals.

Recycling has both pros and cons. The evident advantage for the author is that he/she publishes more with recycling than without it, and consequently the author and his/her institution may receive higher rewards, e.g. a more substantial CV, higher salary or higher revenues. Recycling also has disadvantages. One is that readers may have confusing responses to similar phenomena, and as a consequence may not be able to understand the author's conclusions, etc. Another perspective is that recycling academic texts is very anti-green, because it generates extra printing of publications.

I think it is important that recycling academic texts should be minimized at each level of the research stream. The editors have a special responsibility for downstream publications, while the authors have a special responsibility for upstream research. At both levels recycling may be minimized if the author always explains the current state of knowledge, both theoretical and empirical, including knowledge presented in one's own earlier publications, and how the actual paper is related to this knowledge.

6. Ideas for further research

I believe that the downstream recycling of academic texts may generate a problem related to the trustworthiness of the academic community. If this is true the problem must be solved, and a first step towards a solution is a discussion based on an improved analysis of the problem.

Some issues seem to be relevant in researching recycling:

1. Finding more cases to study. This can be improved by asking colleagues if they know any cases and then following up this information.
2. Conducting a qualitative analysis of the selected publications regarding references to one's own earlier publications and conclusions.
3. Comparing the selected publications by using counterfeit programs. This kind of program is used in analyzing papers written by students.

4. Analyzing the references other publications have to the selected publications.
5. Quantitatively analyzing the comparisons.

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