

Beyond Bibliometrics

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Just prior to *Political Geography*'s 2018 Editorial Board meeting (at the annual meeting of the American Association of Geographers in New Orleans), Clarivate Analytics released its 2017 Impact Factor scores, which is the metric most frequently used for ranking journals. *Political Geography*'s numbers were impressive. With an impact factor of 3.495, the journal was now ranked 9th out of 84 journals in Geography and 7th out of 169 journals in Political Science. After falling in 2016 to 16th in Geography and 23rd in Political Science, *Political Geography* had reclaimed its position in the top 10.

This should have been a cause for celebration, but attendees at the meeting raised a number of concerns. No one was upset with *Political Geography*'s performance in the rankings. Rather concerns were raised with how the rankings were being publicised on the journal's website.

For several years, the website had been based on a template developed by its publisher, Elsevier, that features a suite of bibliometric scores, including Impact Factor, near the top of the home page. As Editorial Board member Nick Megoran pointed out at the meeting, this positioning implies to viewers that bibliometrics is *the* measure of the journal's quality. Metrics like the Impact Factor, Megoran charged, were at best partial, misleading, and open to manipulation. At worst, they could detract from the substantive qualities that make the journal the leader in the political geography community.

Other Editorial Board members countered that at many universities scholars seeking a promotion are required to publish in journals of a certain ranking, and more often than not this ranking is based on crude bibliometric scores. Thus, they rebutted, if *Political Geography* is serious about attracting new contributions, including from authors who were not that familiar with the journal (i.e. authors from beyond the Anglo-American geography departments that have historically dominated submissions), then it would be best for the journal to continue publicising bibliometrics prominently on the journal webpage.

Recognising that this debate could itself educate about bibliometrics and their abuse, the journal commissioned a dialogue on this topic, which appears in this issue (January 2019). In the guest editorial that follows, Nick Megoran joins with the Analogue University, a collective at Newcastle University, to challenge bibliometrics, their frequent misuse, and the prominent positions that they often occupy on journal webpages (Analogue University, 2019). In the second contribution, Andrew Plume, a leading bibliometrician with Elsevier, responds (Plume, 2019). As so often happens with academic debates, the two sides are not so far apart as they first appear. Plume agrees with the Analogue University that bibliometrics are prone to misinterpretation and misuse. However, he differs with the Analogue University with regards to strategy. Whereas the Analogue

University urges that bibliometrics be 'buried', for Plume the problematic nature of bibliometrics is a reason for *publicising* them, so that potential consumers of the data can be alerted to the measures' methodologies and limits.

There may be good reason for considering bibliometrics as one of many factors when deciding which journal should receive a manuscript that is ready for submission. Most authors want their work to be noticed by their colleagues, and bibliometrics are an (imperfect) measure of this. However, as Berg et al. (2016) have demonstrated, metrics for measuring 'excellence' are woven into the fabric of the modern, neoliberal university, and publishing decisions are made within this institutional context. Journals and authors operate in a pressurized academic environment where administrators are seeking to meet 'performance goals,' newly-minted PhDs are seeking employment, and junior faculty are seeking promotion and tenure. In many universities and national systems of higher education, the standards for measuring 'excellence' and 'performance', at the level of the university, the department, and the individual, explicitly include publication in 'top-tier' journals. *Political Geography* cannot single-handedly change this obsession with ranking by 'burying' our status in the top tier. Thus, we will continue to display bibliometric measures in the 'Journal Metrics' box on our webpage.

At the same time though, we will use these measures, and their placement on the webpage, as an opportunity for questioning the ways in which they are often accepted as objective measures of a journal's quality. As Plume notes, the text on the 'Journal Insights' page (which is linked from the 'Journal Metrics' box on the homepage, or it can be accessed directly at <https://journalinsights.elsevier.com/journals/0962-6298>) provides elements of this critique as it details each of the commonly used metrics. However, over the next weeks *Political Geography* will be unveiling a newly designed 'Journal Metrics' box that will give greater prominence to these critiques, in part by linking the box to a new page that will feature these three editorials, as well as the Elsevier 'Journal Insights' content.

In short, *Political Geography's* mission is to give authors and administrators the information that they require about the journal's scores *and* to also give them the information that they require to question the validity of those scores and challenge their misuse. To a large extent, *Political Geography* (and Elsevier) have already been following the mandate of the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), which was developed in 2012 by the American Society for Cell Biology and sets out basic principles for how bibliometrics should and should not be used. For instance, Elsevier's 'Journal Insights' page closely aligns with DORA's call for publishers to "[present] the [Journal Impact Factor] in the context of a variety of journal-based metrics (e.g., 5-year impact factor, EigenFactor, SCImago, h-index, editorial and publication times, etc.) that provide a richer view of journal performance" (DORA, 2012, art. 6). However, heeding the call from the Analogue University, *Political Geography* has now become an official signatory of DORA, a move that we hope will give added weight to efforts to reduce the misuse of bibliometrics.

But this whole discussion leads to further questions for political geographers: Perhaps the problem at hand has less to do with how we *measure* quality than with the concept of *quality* itself, a term whose meaning has become inseparable from the individualist, competitive ethos of neoliberalism. The ways in which we rank journals and use those rankings to reward (and punish) institutions and individuals is certainly a problem, but it also reflects deeper, structural problems within the academy.

Political Geography provides a case in point. Since its inception (as *Political Geography Quarterly*) in 1982, the journal has called itself the 'flagship journal' of the subdiscipline, not because we have the highest Impact Factor among political geography journals (although at present we do) but because we publish the articles that shape the subdiscipline. That quality – agenda-setting and leadership – is one that can never really be expressed in metrics. When one steps back from the competitive ethos of neoliberalism it becomes apparent that leadership is not dominance. Indeed, true leadership is *complementary* with, and facilitates, the flourishing of multiple perspectives (Westley et al., 2006).

Today, the *Political Geography* flagship is in a very different ocean than the one that we ventured into in 1982. We are now part of a growing fleet, sailing alongside *Geopolitics*, *Environment and Planning C*, *Space and Polity*, and *Territory, Politics, Governance*, and possibly others depending on one's definition of a 'political geography journal'. *Political Geography* has grown as well; with this issue we are expanding from six to eight volumes per year. As we have grown, we have continued to hold an agenda-setting position, but within a diversified and enriched field of journals that reflects the current vibrancy of the subfield. *Political Geography* still aspires to leadership, and we believe that we still achieve it. However our best indicator of that isn't any metric. It is in the 394 thought-provoking submissions and 832 insightful peer reviews that we received from our readers over the past twelve months. And for this we are grateful.

References

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