

## In Defense of Academic Standards Against Strange Hierarchies and Crass Quantifications

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### ABSTRACT

As one comes across the academic domain, one witnesses a strange hegemony in the publishing world: hegemony of high power, CARE-listed and Scopus indexed journals over the rest. It's no more surprising to discover the mass desperation for getting papers published in such elite journals. This has also contributed to the mushrooming of professional farms/ agencies/ companies in the market who are coming forward openly to extend complete publishing support: from writing the script till it gets published in the elite journals. The present piece represents a modest endeavour to problematize the civilizational anxiety for elite publications in the name of 'quality'.

**Key words:** Citation, Impact Factor, Quality, Quantification, Elite Journal.

The year 2025 has commenced with a number of changes in various realms of life. The change in leadership in Delhi assembly elections is just an indication. The domain of higher education is no exception. The UGC based on recommendations of an expert committee has now decided to discontinue UGC CARE (Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics) listing of journals. This is bound to have a number of ramifications.

As one looks at the world of academic publishing in contemporary times, one comes across a series of conjectures, which run in the following manner in public imagination: research papers published in CARE-listed journals/ Scopus-indexed are meritorious papers and are worth reading; only the CARE-listed and Scopus-indexed journals have got the mandate to certify quality; rest of the research papers being published outside the realms of CARE and Scopus are not worth pursuing; serious questions and suspicions are often raised regarding their academic qualities.

### AGAINST HIERARCHIES

At the outset, the latest UGC decision of its expert committee regarding the CARE-listed journals tends to dispute a series of conjectures. It tends to deconstruct the positivistic understanding of the journal papers that often regards CARE and Scopus as sacrosanct. Such journals used to boast of a different kind of aristocracy: they are the champions, their papers the best ones. It is

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no more surprising to observe the emergence of a sort of publishing capitalism in the market. Many agencies have erupted overnight to capitalize one's desperation for elite publication. In other words, many private firms/companies have appeared in the scene that have been utterly aggressive in their marketing: they are openly offering publication assistance; they are expressing their readiness to extend all kinds of publication related services starting from writing to publication in CARE/Scopus journals. They assure to get one's paper written and to publish the same in the elite journals. Of course, they charge heavy amounts for such services. They communicate such offers to the students/ research scholars/ faculty members through emails, apart from online advertisements in the websites including facebook. It's now a consumer market wherein everything including publications are on sale and everything including paper writing can be outsourced. To put it simply, to some extent, publications are on sale. If you are not capable of writing standard papers either owing to your poor vocabulary, low intelligence or poor language skills, you are not going to be a loser if you have the purchasing power. You hire such publishing farms and they will write for you, publish for you. It's sheer business, which is mutually profiting: a win-win situation for both the parties. One succeeds in getting a publication and the other one earns hefty money. In such a scenario, it becomes difficult to make out which paper is one's original manuscript and which paper is one's fully-hired publication. As Boeckstyns et al (2021) comments, "pay to publish" only tends to intensify the academic misconduct in a myriad ways. In other words, at a time when the market has entered the realm of journal publications, the boundary line between one's own writing and fully-hired writing often remains blurred and ambiguous. This explains why often one comes across certain scholars having CARE/ Scopus publications though they may be lacking miserably in their vocabulary, language, writing skill and corresponding domain knowledge.

The entire obsession for CARE/ Scopus journal stems from the state policy that put formal emphasis on quantitative logic. In other words, the state is obsessive to judge one's academic productivity and it has devised its own conceptual categories to operationalize the quantification exercise. First, the API (Academic Performance Index) score. It has developed a formula to quantify one's publication by assigning a corresponding score. Second, the Impact Factor. The score for a journal paper is conditioned by the

corresponding impact factor of the journal. Higher is the journal's impact factor, higher is the score of the papers published in it. This is now taken as an index of quality to evaluate, rank and judge the journal standard, apart from identifying the quality of the individual papers published (Jain 2011). Skeptics tend to frown upon the sanctity of the 'impact factor on a number of counts: the journal impact factors are not statistically representative of individual journal articles; the journal impact factors correlate poorly with actual citations of individual articles; the database dominated by American publications carries an exclusive English language bias (Seglen 1997). 'Impact factor' had begun initially as a bibliographic research tool for retrieval of overlapping research which eventually emerged as a parameter for ascertaining paper quality: citation indicates quality. It employs a crass quantitative logic. That is, it counts citations without taking into account the context of the citations (Ophthof 1997). Third, the High Power journals. Certain journals are considered high power journals. One's paper is rated highly if it has been published in a high power journal. There exists a reductionist approach to the entire assessment of one's publication. That is, what is published in the so-called certified journals are considered pieces representative of top most quality; the rest of the write-ups are bereft of standards.

### THE CITATION QUESTION

Unambiguously, citations are taken as the index of quality. Higher is the number of citations, higher is the quality of the paper/ journal. That is, quantity (number of times cited) determines quality. The moot question is, do all publications get cited? Can citation guarantee quality? The truth is, a considerable amount of research publications are never cited. Does that render them worthless? On the contrary, there may be huge low quality publications carrying the highest number of citations for some reasons or the other. To take citations to assess the quality of a paper is always a questionable proposition. The following arguments shared by Ophthof (1997) appear worth learning: the impact factor may not truly assure quality of individual papers; it need not be taken as a parameter to assess quality of individual scientists.

The way the modern state promotes the culture of quantification, one tends to witness a different form of academic stratification in the publication domain: a domain that reiterates the language of hierarchy and crass inequality. The way the modern state legitimizes such stratification in the realm of publication, it appears

as if all those having high power/ high impact factor/ CARE-Scopus publications are original scholars; as if all those not having such creamy layer publications are twenty-four carat idiots, dogs, donkeys, vixens or millipedes; as if all those papers published outside such elite journals are not worth reading; as if all those scientists/ social scientists of global eminence not having papers in such elite journals are hicks and morons.

### **PUBLICATION: THE SURVIVAL QUESTION**

Not surprisingly, the reason why one is keen to publish is quite obvious. It's no more one's choice; rather, it's one's survival compulsion in the academic world. The educational administration links it directly to one's career progression. In today's academic world, publication is directly related to one's selection, promotion, grant, success and position (Singhal & Kalra 2021). Greater is the brand name of the journal, higher is the validation of one's scholarship. Needless to say, in the competitive race, one's identity, recognition and reputation is proportionate to one's publication visibility. This explains the mass desperation of many of the present day academic professionals for branded publications. It has become a kind of civilizational madness.

### **THE HAUNTING QUESTIONS: RISING BEYOND QUANTIFICATION**

The questions that continually haunt one's imagination are quite irresistible. Can there be a uniform index to ascertain the quality of publications taking place in all streams – Science, Arts, Commerce or Professional Courses? What do the streams represent – uniformity or difference? Should the quality monitoring parameter be stream-specific? Is the paper-based scoring system the only unproblematic mode to ascertain quality and one's academic worth? What about the questions of originality and authenticity (especially at a time when everything in the publishing world is on sale/ can be hired? Is the present scoring system a better method of selecting worthy faculty members/ academicians? If the answer is yes, does it mean that the method in which the academic performance was judged and academicians were inducted earlier was defective? In the same vein, does it denote that all our teachers who have never got a single paper published in the so-called high-power journals are worthless/ zero intellectuals? The moot question remains, can one's creative writing be quantified? Is it possible to judge one's academic worth beyond quantification?

The idea is not to be cynical of any change arbitrarily. Instead, one's intent is also not to indulge in anything new uncritically. This is especially significant at a time when the modern state is making a shift from one paradigm to another paradigm. We are operating in a system. That does not mean, one will not question the system. In the same way, the alternative system of performance appraisal (API) need not be treated finite, fixed and unproblematic. It must also be subjected to adequate degree of tests, verifications with an amount of organized skepticism in the best interests of academics.

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### **Competing interests**

The authors declare no competing interests.

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