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Publication pressures create knowledge silos

The pressure for scholarly publications creates a culture of knowledge silos, argues postdoctoral Fellow Sandra Obradović. If young researchers were also taught to explain research to a general audience, this would not only help their careers, but also bring science into society.

When I published my first paper, my sister (a non-academic) asked to read it. The next time I travelled home I brought her a printed copy of the journal, and she began reading the article. About a minute in, she stopped, politely closed the journal and said “I’m sure it’s really interesting, but I don’t really think it’s meant for normal people.”

Welcome to the world of the academic paradox: we publish our research, but we don’t communicate it.

As a PhD student, one of the biggest pressures I faced was to publish my work. I heard stories of these mythical creatures who had published thirty articles during their PhDs; I would scroll through Twitter and see colleagues sharing acceptance success stories, and I would return to my work with a sense of urgency: just get it published already. The overarching theme was clear: prove your worth and the value of your research, but do so through the only legitimate mean for career progression—the ‘high impact’ journal article.

This unitary pressure, beyond its impact on the self-esteem and general mental health of PhDs, can lead to questionable research practices, compromising the research process and perpetuating a culture in which immediacy trumps integrity. Of course, for those of us in psychology, things are changing, as the replication crisis, pre-registrations and open access has made clear. Yet these changes are happening within the confines of an all too readily acceptable culture built on the maxim ‘publish or perish’. It is not that publishing is questioned as being part of the cause for growing academic misconduct, it is simply that our publishing practices need to be refined and improved.

While these concerns within academia are readily debated and discussed, there are bigger consequences to the ‘publish

or perish’ discourse that we spend less time acknowledging. Promoting journal publishing as the gold standard for PhD students to strive for limits their willingness to engage with more diverse, non-academic audiences and platforms. Not because they don’t care, but because they’re told their ‘discipline’ doesn’t. If alternative forms of engagement are sought out, it becomes an activity you pursue on top of your academic writing, with little guidance, support or recognition for it. Consequently, we become trained into a culture of promoting knowledge silos of academic communication, learning how to write poorly, and promoting those who do well at both.

My favourite illustration of the difficulties of overcoming these silos is when I discuss research articles with my students. They are all quick to pick up the terminology of the academic bubble, and so I always challenge them by asking ‘how would you explain this to your grandmother?’. This oftentimes elicits laughter, followed by silence. As someone who talks a lot with her grandmother, trust me, this skill is difficult to master.

Now don’t get me wrong, publishing is a fantastic opportunity to communicate your research to fellow colleagues, academics and networks. But they are not the only audience that matters, and ultimately, this culture of echo chamber communication is counterproductive to the ability of academia to engage with, and have an impact on, social, cultural and political matters. If we want our research to matter beyond our disciplinary borders, we must recognize the value of a diverse range of knowledge exchange and engagement, not only when we train PhDs but also when we evaluate them as potential hires.

Acknowledging and valuing diverse publication and communication portfolios comes with several benefits. Firstly, it

would allow for a better relationship to be fostered between academia and the public, demystifying what a PhD, and an academic career, is—the perpetual question of ‘what is it you actually do?’. PhD students who receive training in research methods should also receive training in research communication, aimed at developing skills that transcend the boundaries of academia and actually allow a bridge to be built between academia and the general public. Secondly, this change would benefit PhDs, as well as early career researchers, when they write grant applications, as these often require a move from a specialist language to a more accessible way of communicating a research proposal. Lastly, it would instil a confidence in PhDs to proactively share their work with charities, communities, organization and businesses that might benefit from their insights.

There is also a benefit to those who decide that academia is not for them after their PhD or a couple of post-docs. For a lot of PhDs, the leap from academia to ‘the real world’ is often a difficult one to navigate, as most of our PhD training and work caters to a career in academia.

Instead of promoting a culture in which PhDs need to learn how to write poorly to succeed, we should be promoting a culture in which PhDs are learning how to write differently, for different audiences and purposes. □

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