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(Inter)disciplinary landscapes of publishing and evaluation in SSH: Perspectives and Challenges

Björn Hammarfelt, 23 November 2021

Thank you for this great presentation – introduction – and thank you for the invitation to be part of this event. I'm sorry that I missed yesterday, I realise now just from the first talk here that I missed a lot of good things but at least I can be here today.

So, I will try to share a presentation.

[technical remarks omitted]

So as said in the introduction, I'm from Library and Information Science and I realised just now that that makes my perspective a bit double on this question because Library and Information Science, we also deal with the classification of journals – journals as an infrastructure – while we also have our own journals of course and publish in them, so we have a double role here, and that also extends to issues like open access which was actually started by librarians and was a deeply political movement at that time. Now it's more capitalist, as said before.

So when getting this question talking about interdisciplinary journals, I realised that I'm far from an expert on interdisciplinary journals, but what I do know a bit about is how research is evaluated and how that might impact journals, and interdisciplinary journals. My talk will be centred around publishing and its link to evaluation and how that affects this marketplace which Carli talked about earlier.

So, the outline for my talk is: first to say something about disciplines and interdisciplinarity. I think these are concepts that we usually take for granted but I think just to get a background to the topic of my talk and to some of the arguments I think it's important to have an understanding of what these entities actually are. Then I will say something more general about evaluation in the social sciences and humanities and how that affects interdisciplinarity and perhaps some conclusions towards the end.

So, I've been interested in disciplines for quite some time – I did my PhD on literary studies as a field and as a discipline using bibliometric methods – and I always had a

problem with the different kind of definitions used to define disciplines, because sometimes disciplines are understood like a formation of a field, like a more social organisation, while in other contexts it's used more like a topic, something that you can search for in the library or in a database. And for my talk today I think it's important to emphasise that for me discipline is foremost social, or a social system. It's a way of organising labour, organising the way that knowledge is produced, and it's largely about power and power relations. So for me, discipline is not the same as a topic, for example. And that makes also the definition of interdisciplinary maybe a bit different.

So when we ask, what is a discipline, it's also context dependent and dependent upon perspective, so for example disciplines might be more pronounced in some countries compared to others, I would also say that humanities and social sciences have a stronger identity as disciplines compared to, for example, the medical sciences. And of course disciplines have been criticised quite a lot, and that's why interdisciplinary research is so much pronounced in for example grants, by governments and by different organisations, so, it's said to hinder communication, that it locks up knowledge within ivory towers; that it suppresses innovation, it doesn't connect to society; and maybe most important that instead of gathering perspectives and ways of dealing with urgent problems, it divides them into different disciplines. That also relates to education of course.

So the idea of interdisciplinarity, according to Abbott, and I think he's right, emerged simultaneously with the concept of discipline, so this is not a new idea that we have to work between departments and disciplines. And interdisciplinarity is an integration of concepts, theory and methods, so, resulting in a more complete way of dealing with a specific problem. And I won't go into the details here but we usually say that "multidisciplinary" or "crossdisciplinary" is a lower level of integration compared to interdisciplinarity, while "transdisciplinarity" is an even deeper integration of perspectives.

And the reasons, then, for interdisciplinarity: maybe, changes cognitive and epistemological structure of the field, so emerging from ideas, from philosophies within the field, new fields, between disciplines emerge. It might be the borrowing of tools and methods, theories and concepts, the pull of urgent social and intellectual problems. And that theory we have for example ethnic studies, gender studies, these kind of, now disciplines that emerged from social problems. And there are also complexity in disciplinary research, and relations with other disciplines that lead [inaudible] to these interdisciplinary fields.

So that's a bit about the interdisciplinary and disciplinary concepts that we will come back to and also relate to the background of my research more generally, and that's the idea of us as researchers but also in society in general, that we are evaluated constantly, and one of the authors of these books on evaluation, Peter Dahler-Larsen, he even claims that it's easier to imagine a world with aliens invading us than a society without evaluation. And that might be an exaggeration but we are constantly evaluated, if you go to the security shack at an airport, you're supposed to evaluate your experience. As soon as you buy anything you're supposed to evaluate how the buy went, the product and so forth.

And so evaluation is not just only about improving life, it's also a ritual that we go through in a modern society: it's part of how society works and how we perceive ourselves. And

my specific interest in this evaluation society is how evaluate research and research publications. And that method is usually done through bibliometrics of various kinds. Bibliometrics is the measurement of publications and citations. We had a very interesting discussion about referencing and I think referencing, because it's used to evaluate, referencing is also a very political act.

But the bibliometric landscape – and now I'm talking about a view from the Nordic countries, I know that bibliometric systems and the way you use these measures is different from different national contexts of course. But it operates on different levels, so we have university rankings, which you all know about, international comparisons, for example Sweden, we are obsessed with being behind Denmark for the moment in these kind of measurements, but you also have resources allocated between and within institutions, so between universities in a national system, between departments for example, you have the REF in the UK for example, which is the most famous example of these kind of evaluations although it uses more peer review than bibliometrics, and we also have the micro-use for individual use, people showing their citation scores, the number of publications, it's used for promotion and hiring across the world.

And in my recent work I'm mostly interested in this micro level, because that's where I think it affects researchers the most, when we feel that we are evaluated as individual researchers, so these kind of measures can be used for performance review, promotion – it's quite common, that's something that I've studied – for hiring, research applications, general visibility, and also these specific platforms that quantify us as academics, Google Scholar, ResearchGate for example, which create scores and different kinds of indexes. And this individual use of metrics in social science and humanities is also quite different between nations, so we did the study some years ago that showed that in Sweden for example, metrics is used quite moderately by individual academics themselves, while in Australia it's much higher.

I won't go into the details of why this difference but I would say that it could be, Australia of course the English language is important, they have also had a more, if you call it, neo-liberal politics of academia in recent years, a more competitive market, that may be some of the explanations for the difference.

And if you look at the ways you can evaluate journals and individuals that are available to us today, we have this kind of landscape where there are a lot of well-established ways of evaluating, for example, Web of Science or Scopus, but they're not very well attuned to the social science and humanities, or at least not to the humanities, because they use citations within the database, which is not that common. On the other hand we have other types of sources, which have a broader range of data coming in, but the kind of data used is not always of good quality, like in Google Scholar or Altmetric. Altmetric is a way of measuring for example mentions on social media of articles. And then we also have lists of journals, which is a more stable way of evaluating research but which is also problematic, especially when it comes to interdisciplinary research.

So now back to, that's a bit of background to disciplines and research evaluation, and now coming back to interdisciplinarity and interdisciplinary journals. So my argument is that disciplines often, it's the context where research is evaluated and that depends on, compared to other workplaces, the reputation of an academic is not only dependent on what your nearest boss in your organisation thinks about you or your closest colleagues,

but it's also about the recognition among a wider community of colleagues around the world. And that's what Whitley has called "reputation work organisations" so we have different levels on which we are evaluated, where we'll build our reputation as scholars. And we have different types then of disciplinary evaluations: so for example evaluation in journals, especially if they are disciplinary of course, journals choose their reviewers usually within their discipline. Grants, it's very common that also, major problem for interdisciplinary research, that grants, at least in the Swedish system, you choose your topic, your discipline, and you're evaluated within that frame, so if I apply for a grant within the educational sciences, I will be criticised for not being an educational scientist or having the right journal articles for example. And most visible for academic positions, we are still very much focused on disciplinary origin.

And also then for journal ranking lists, like the European ranking list, or the Association of Business Schools list, in economics, or the Norwegian list, which is used in the Nordic countries. These lists are ranked by disciplines and specialists within these disciplines which then makes it problematic when it comes to interdisciplinarity. So for example then, when you're applying for a position you are usually not only evaluated if you have the right credentials but also if you fit in the discipline, there's a kind of boundary-keeping going on. So for example in history, your training within the discipline is important, in order to get a position. In economics, on the other hand, ability to publish in central journals of the field, not interdisciplinary journals, is very important. While in biomedicine there's more focus on skills and ability to fit into a certain team or lab or context, and we can see this quite clearly by studying how economists are evaluated for positions, that this kind of evaluation is going on, so if you're not published in key economic journals you are not appointed. So, being outside mainstream economics, you will not get the position.

On the other hand, which is quite interesting, for economics as a discipline and study, you don't have to have training as an economist. If - I've seen these examples, of physicists, for example - they are able to publish, they are able to achieve the level of using the methods and the agreed-upon practices to publish in central journals, then they are accepted as part of the economic field. Which would not be possible for example in history where you have to be trained as an historian.

But this of course in economics, and there are other studies showing this more clearly than the ones here, is very much dependent on publishing in key central economic journals in order to achieve a position in the field. And this makes it difficult, for example, to do the interdisciplinary research.

Another example, a very influential study of this, was done a few years ago, when they looked at the ABS-list, which is a very important journal list within economics, and it showed that the more interdisciplinary, so there you see the level here of diversity, below, this is way of calculating references for example, like they did here, showing that the more interdisciplinary the journal, the more likely it's ranked lower in these rankings, so that corresponds to the earliest statements in these evaluations, that central journals are within the core of economics. And this of course has consequences when researchers choose where to publish.

So the general effects, then, of these kind of evaluations that are ongoing in academia, is that it leads to strategic behaviour and goal displacement; this also relates to the double role which I think was also part of the previous talk, where journals have double functions, they function both as a way of disseminating knowledge but also as giving reward and recognition to research. And these kind of measurements might then, lead to goal displacement: focus on publishing in the right journal rather than doing the best research. Task reduction: you might abandon for example publishing in Swedish or French and opting just for English because that's the best way to get into high-scoring journals. And important here then, bias against interdisciplinarity: the easiest way to get recognition within the discipline is to focus on very disciplinary journals. And it might also have epistemological consequences, where researchers are most likely to be published in highly-ranked journals or get a lot of citations, to focus on that kind of research instead of more complex issues.

And the effect, then, in the humanities and social sciences, is greater awareness and worry about publication practices, there's this constant worry, and ideas about this that I see a lot when I talk about these issues. We also see an increase in English language articles, I think that's across all nations, there's also an increase in the number of publications marked as "peer reviewed" in some form. And it might lead to possible tensions between younger researchers that are more internationally-oriented and more senior scholars, and also be conflict within fields in terms, what kind of research should be done, should it be more quantitative or qualitative for example.

So based on this I think interdisciplinary research is generally undervalued in research assessment. That partly depends on our system being built around disciplines when it comes to peer review for example, or the way that grants are allocated. Journal rankings, which are very popular and also seem to get, even if they are not used, they might have influence, so the ABS-list for example, are not used formally in many countries but it's used as an informal instrument for evaluating candidates for positions. The same applies to the Norwegian list that lists, that ranks journals in level 1 or level 2, it's not used in Sweden officially on a national level, but it's still used when evaluating researchers, when they negotiating salary or looking for positions. So these kind of lists have a life of their own. And they also have an afterlife after they have been abandoned, so people refer to them.

And even if we promote interdisciplinary research, academic careers are largely structured within disciplines, which means that for example, universities, we have examples in Sweden and elsewhere that have new thematic constellations for educating researchers. When they finally get their PhD it might be quite hard to navigate because the positions that are available are within the older disciplines.

But how, then, to promote interdisciplinary research and interdisciplinary journals? I think more focus on reach and breadth, rather than evaluation might be one possible option, to look for different kind of ways of seeing the impact of a journal. I think Carl's discussion earlier is very good in the sense that journals can play a local role, a political role, a transformational role for example, I think this has to be more emphasised perhaps when evaluating journals and researchers. I actually think that citation scores may be a better option in some fields for assessing research, rather than journal rankings, because journal rankings are much based on what the so-called, what was earlier called,

A-list researchers think about hierarchies. Citation scores could actually give another picture, to some degree.

I always think further attention to impact outside academia. The very central journals, top journals usually are very directed inwards academia, so focussing on this outside impact might actually be a way to promote a wide variety of journals and also interdisciplinary journals.

And finally, if we interdisciplinary journals to prosper we also have to award interdisciplinarity in academic careers in the evaluations of various kinds. Thank you for listening.