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# Communication or Credentialing? On the Value of Academic Publishing

Blog Admin

**Casey Brienza** discusses why the prestige of the publication outlet is of paramount importance when it comes to making impact with academic research.

Nobody outside of the profession reads scholarly books and journal articles. It's become a common complaint in the academic world, and among some disciplines such as sociology it's also de rigeur to take the complaint a step further: Nobody listens to us. American sociologists, for example, look askance at economist and New York Times columnist [Paul Krugman](#) and lament the lack of visibility in the media of their discipline. British sociologists, meanwhile, worry about the impending 'impact agenda' of the [Research Excellence Framework](#). Although couched in different vocabularies—in the US academy, 'impact' typically refers to narrow quantitative measures such as citation counts and impact factors—what scholars are professing to wanting is to make a positive difference in the world.

Yet the number of monographs, journals, and other publication outlets proliferate by the year, and as the volume of research output increases, the possibility of being read even within one's own profession decreases by the year, and too often so-called debates within disciplines devolve into mutual appreciation societies who do not deign to read the other side. The great bulk of research is never cited at all. So why do we continue to publish if not for the sake of scholarly communication? The obvious answer to this question, I would argue, is for the sake of credentials, outward signs of cultural and symbolic capital which we then deploy as lines in our CV to achieve particular professional goals.

Usually, these are professional goals as they relate to career advancement within the academy. In the UK, it is important to be 'REF-able', the pressure to publish coming in regular cycles throughout one's career. Similarly in the US, getting one's first job post-PhD requires publications, and keeping one's job in the context of the tenure track often requires even more. Understand publications as professional credentials and you understand why the prestige of the publication outlet—a university press with an Ivy League affiliation, for example, or a high-impact journal—becomes paramount: In a world where not even other scholars are wont to read you, prestige of publication outlet, the brand, as it were, becomes proxy for quality.

However, if understood as credentials then publications are also very useful outside of the academic field. In my view, scholarly writing is first and foremost a way of having a seat at the table. Your book will not effect change on its own, but if you wave it around high enough and long enough you might be given a soapbox relevant to your research topic from which you will be able to make your case anew. By these lights, it would be wrong to debate whether or not journalism is a better medium of communication than the journal article. More productive, rather, is to view the journal article as the baseline price of admission to an opportunity that has only just opened for you, an opportunity that is now yours to work or waste. The labour of influence and impact does not end when you've written up—it has only just begun.

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