

The advent of online dissemination techniques allow academics to focus just on developing great ideas, without needlessly trying to play the system.

by Blog Admin

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*It's clear that the public are against a societal system that produces a top 1 per cent of income distribution and won't tolerate the same hierarchy of ideas in academia either. **Danny Quah** argues that a more level playing field is desirable, and possible through increased online scholarly activity.*



In the New York Times recently Paul Krugman described how academic economists grow up, and how blogging might change that:

“你通过关系网获得这个圈子的临时会员资格 (...); 这整个过程都是非正式的 —— 并且非常不民主，圈外人几乎没有参与讨论的机会。

没有哪个名校的人通过阅读学术期刊来获取新知；他们只读工作论文，学术期刊只是墓碑而已。

所以我们现在有以博客和在线工作论文为形式的快速学术交流 —— 我认为这非常好。”

All right, I paraphrase, but not by much.

Readers behind the Great Firewall might not be able to access easily outlets like the New York Times, or indeed many other forums taken for granted in the West. So I write this, in part, to give those readers access to an NYT article by Paul Krugman. (If any English-speaking reader finds infuriating that parts of this entry are in Chinese script, well, that's part of the meta-subtext.)

But I have another objective additionally.

Scholars worldwide are told there is only one model of publishing and disseminating ideas — that model developed in forums primarily in the West. That model, these scholars are told, is the one they must adopt if they are to progress in their career. The problem is, for a range of reasons, those scholars don't get to see lively discussion of that way of doing research. Paul Krugman recently presented his views on this (if you are not behind the GFW, you can read it [online](#) at the *New York Times*; if you are, however, you might try to access the [PDF](#) file I've made not to undermine the publisher's rights but for your convenience).

To pull out parts of that article, here's Krugman on how to advance your career:

“You got provisional entree to such a group through connections — basically, being a student of someone who mattered, and being tagged as having potential. You got permanent membership by doing enough clever stuff; the informal rule was three good papers, one to get noticed, one to show that the first wasn't a fluke, one to show that you had staying power.

And journal publication? Well, tenure committees needed that, but it was so slow relative to the pace of ongoing work that it no longer acted as an information conduit. I presented my paper on target zones at a 1988 conference; by the time it was formally published, in 1991, I had to add a section on the subsequent literature, because there were around 150 derivative papers already out there.

The whole thing was informal — and also deeply undemocratic, offering very little way for outsiders to enter the debate. Nobody at a top school learned stuff by reading the journals; it was all working papers,

with the journals serving as tombstones.

So now we have rapid-fire exchange via blogs and online working papers — and I think it's all good."

The working papers Krugman refers to are of course the famous NBER ones, with their prominent and distinctive yellow-jacketed covers.

One reaction to Krugman's description might, perversely, be that the aspiring academic now realizes ever greater returns to getting into such a "top school" [heck, from here on out, it's no-holds-barred getting that recommendation letter!] Since the inner circle must, by definition, be small and exclusive relative to the crowd, this classic "economics of superstars" scenario produces a highly unequal outcome. Many writers already disavow a societal organization that produces a top ultra-rich 1% of the income distribution. How much longer will they tolerate it for their own community of scholars? The economics of idea-production might say that skewness is an equilibrium outcome; it does not say that that outcome is optimal.

The other reaction, perhaps the reasonable one, is to be aware that the more level playing field that is now possible, with the new tools for blogging and social networking, gives wider scope and opportunity for idea-dissemination and personal advancement, so that an academic can now focus just on developing great ideas, not any more try to game the system or network needlessly.

But how does the new generation get validation when the old people, apart from those like Krugman, don't "get" the new tools? That inner group with the yellow jackets isn't going to just roll over without a fight, even if doing so might ultimately be good for the profession.

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