

Citations are not enough: Academic promotion panels must take into account a scholar's presence in popular media.

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Scholars all around the world are almost solely judged upon their publications in (prestigious) peer-reviewed journals. [Asit Biswas](#) and [Julian Kirchherr](#) argue that publications in the popular media must count as well. After all, these publications are crucial in informing practitioners' decision-making.

Many of the world's most talented thinkers may be university professors, but sadly [most of them do not shape today's public debates](#) or influence policies. Indeed, scholars often frown upon publishing in the popular media. "Running an opinion editorial to share my views with the public? Sounds like activism to me", a professor recently noted at a conference, hosted by the University of Oxford. The absence of professors from shaping public debates and policies seems to have exacerbated in recent years, particularly in the social sciences. During 1930s and 1940s, 20 percent of articles in the prestigious *The American Political Science Review* focused on policy recommendations. At the last count, the share was down to a [meagre 0.3 percent](#).

Even debates among scholars do not seem to function properly. Up to [1.5 million peer-reviewed articles](#) are published annually. However, many are ignored even within the scientific community: 82 percent of articles published in humanities are [not even cited once](#). Rarely do scholars refer to [32 percent of the peer-reviewed articles in the social and 27 percent in the natural sciences](#). If a paper is cited, though, this does not imply it has actually been read. According to one estimate, only 20 percent of papers cited [have actually been read](#). We suspect that an average paper in a peer-reviewed journal is read completely at most by no more than 10 people. Hence, impacts of most peer-reviewed publications even within the scientific community are miniscule.



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Many scholars aspire to contribute to their discipline's knowledge and to influence practitioner's decision-making. However, it is widely acknowledged practitioners rarely read articles published in peer-reviewed journals. We know of no senior policy-maker, or senior business leader who ever reads any peer-reviewed papers, even in recognized journals like *Nature*, *Science* or *The Lancet*.

No wonder: First of all, most journals are prohibitively expensive to access for anyone outside of academia. Even if the current open-access-movement [becomes more successful](#), the [incomprehensible jargon](#) and the sheer volume and lengths of papers (mostly unnecessary!) would still prevent practitioners (including journalists) from reading them.

Brevity is central. Many government leaders now maintain a standing instruction to prepare a two-page summary every morning of what the popular media writes about their policies. In India, this practice was started by Indira Gandhi. Ministers in Canada insist on similar round-ups. Governments in the Middle East even summarize discussions on new social media these days. No decision-maker would ever ask for summaries regarding publications and discussions in academic journals. If academics want to have impact on policy makers and practitioners, they must consider popular media, which has never been easy for scholars. This in spite of the fact that media firms have developed many innovative business models to help scholars reach out.

One of the most promising models: Project Syndicate (PS), a non-profit-organization which distributes commentary by the world's thought leaders [to more than 500 newspapers comprising 300 million readers in 154 countries](#). Any commentary accepted by PS is automatically translated into 12 other languages and then distributed globally to the entire network. However, even if scholars agree regarding the importance of publishing in the popular press, the system plays against them. In order to obtain tenure, [scholars must churn out as many peer-reviewed articles as possible](#), publications in (prestigious) peer-reviewed journals are the key performance indicator within academia: whether anyone reads them or not becomes a secondary consideration.

It may be time to reassess scholars' performance. For tenure and promotion considerations, scholars' impacts on policy formulation and public debates should also be assessed. These publications often showcase the practical relevance and potential application of the research results to solve real world problems. Admittedly, impact is not guaranteed. Particularly most policy-makers already have a reasonably exact idea regarding the policy they would prefer. The policy must, first and foremost, satisfy their plethora of stakeholders. Very few decision-makers look only for the most optimal economic, social, environmental, technical, or political solution.

Those who look for scientific evidence, though, would vastly benefit from more scholarly publications in the popular press. Slowly, this is recognized within academia. For instance, the National University of Singapore (NUS) now encourages faculty to list op-eds on their profiles. However, significant more emphasis is still given to publications in so-called high impact journals.

Change is happening very, very slowly.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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