

The ERA of obscurity

For social science researchers, there is a strong tension between writing for scholarly journals and more accessible publications, writes

Brian Martin.

Is one of your goals to communicate to wider audiences? If so, the government's Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative may be inadvertently pushing you in the opposite direction.

With ERA, the pressure is to publish in journals with the top rankings for quality. But in many cases these journals are not the best ones to get your message out: they are oriented to scholars and often expect an indigestible style.

For example, some of my articles about dissent are long, complex and heavily referenced, just what is expected for scholars. But some of my other articles have had far more impact – ones I've written more accessibly covering some of the same ideas – with readers contacting me saying their eyes were opened.

The journals allowing me to publish using an accessible style are refereed but not with high rankings. With ERA, they might be considered a waste of time.

I speak here of research in the social sciences and humanities, relevant to current issues such as social justice. In chemistry or computer engineering, non-specialists do not expect to understand scientific publications.

A colleague of mine at another university was told not to bother publishing in anything except A* and A journals. But sometimes a B journal or – horrors – a journal without a ranking is the most suited for having an impact. She was also told that unless a submission received two referee reports, it would not count in the university's collection.

With such an incentive system, some of my most influential articles wouldn't rate. Two of my articles in a top journal in my field, *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, were selected by the editor for publication without refereeing because she thought they were likely to be influential in the field. Those two articles have received more citations than anything else I've written in the social sciences.

At top social science journals, there

what we were trying to say.

I know a top scholar at another university who publishes in top journals but sometimes prefers lesser ranked journals because then she can write in a clear and direct fashion without being messed up by too many demanding referees.

I put all my articles on my website, and I know from the number of website hits which articles get the most attention. It's certainly not the ones written with the most jargon. Some of the articles that receive thousands of hits per year appeared in non-refereed journals.

A colleague at a US university has the goal of writing a book – he's written lots of them – that will both impress scholars and be widely taken up outside the academy. So far he hasn't found the formula. It seems that if you write in a way that is easy to read and says things of interest to wider audiences, academics will automatically see it as unscholarly.

I'm in the fortunate position of not needing to publish in top-ranked journals to obtain promotion or grants to do my research, so I can choose outlets according to what I think will have the greatest social impact – which often means choosing for readership rather than scholarly

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are typically three to five referees. If you're lucky enough to get through the first round without being rejected outright, you'll get to revise the paper and resubmit it, in which you may have some of the same referees plus new ones. In my experience, trying to please all these referees, aside from being incredibly time-consuming, often results in an article that is unnecessarily complex, indeed contorted.

In one case, a colleague and I submitted a straightforward analysis to a top sociology journal. By the time we had modified the argument to meet referee objections, it was so complicated that readers routinely misunderstood

status. But many of my colleagues, if they want to get ahead, do not have the same freedom. So they will clog the queues at the top-ranked journals.

You might reply that it's possible to write for top journals and write more popular treatments too. Of course it is. But the huge investment for writing in the typical heavy academic style often leaves little energy or inclination for spin-off popular treatments.

Did the people who designed ERA imagine that they would be encouraging scholars to write even less accessibly than before?

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