Measuring Quality in Art History

Resolution of RIHA
(International Association of Research Centres in the History of Art)

This resolution is the outcome of the deliberations of the Annual Assemblies of RIHA held in Brussels (2010) and Prague (2011), and developed in the course of a workshop dedicated to the topic, held at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, in June 2011.

Preamble

The humanities have unique and rigorous means of assessing the quality of scholarship, which are essentially different from those used for the STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). As with any discipline, assessment of scholarship in the humanities must include attention to quality, rigor and accuracy of information as well as produce effective results. Yet in contrast to the natural sciences, which focus primarily on the most recent discoveries and often have a built-in obsolescence, scholarship in the humanities has different goals and temporalities. Assessment of impact must therefore take into account the longer time scale of the measurable influence of humanities research, the limits of prediction and prognosis, and the possibilities for employing critical methods that are specific to the humanities context.

1 BIBLIOMETRICS

In the arts and humanities, bibliometrics are increasingly favoured in the assessment process as a proxy for peer reviewing.

Bibliometrics have played an important role in establishing quality and impact in the natural sciences for over a century. In recent years, however, they have also been proposed by both national and supra-national agencies as a less resource-intensive means than peer review of assessing research quality in the arts and humanities. This tendency has been driven by:

- The commercialization of bibliometric indices.
- The professionalization of library / information services and the application of bibliometrics to inform purchasing policy.
- The use of bibliometrics in drawing up national and international university league tables and the institutional desire to excel in these comparisons.
- The appeal to non-specialists of systems that offer the means of judging specialist disciplines within a seemingly value-neutral comparative system.

The result has been “a dramatic shift away from well-founded scepticism to an uncritical embrace of bibliometric numbers.”[1]

1.1 Benefits of Bibliometrics

The use of bibliometrics in the review process is not entirely without benefit in the arts and humanities. It counters the subjective bias and the dangers of favouritism that are unavoidable in the conventional peer review process. As they are based on a broad spread of data, bibliometrics can offer a wider perspective across the field than the limited and selective knowledge of a single reviewer. More pragmatically, resources such as Google books can provide information on publications that have not attracted the attention of reviewers in conventional journals. Hence, bibliometrics — as one part of a much broader process of review more appropriate to judging quality in the humanities — may make sense for particular institutions and contexts.

1.2 Inapplicability of Bibliometrics in the Arts and Humanities.

A compelling case for bibliometrics and similar quantitative measures as the sole mechanism for evaluating research can be made only for those fields in the natural sciences and medicine in which all major research findings are published in internationally-acknowledged journals and in the same language. The application of these techniques to research in the humanities, in contrast, is profoundly problematical and the results of little value. As a high-ranking employee of the Volkswagenstiftung has noted, "We have to admit that there is simply not enough reliable data and no appropriate methodology to make funding decisions in the humanities based on bibliometrical analysis."[2]

There are many reasons for this.

Bibliometric and citation data are principally drawn from journal articles, the principal vehicles in the STEM subjects for the dissemination of new research findings. In the humanities, in contrast, the journal article is less pivotal, as the monograph remains the gold standard, representing the peak of scholarly achievement with a significantly greater impact. In the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise conducted in the UK, books and book chapters constituted 1.2% of the submissions in both science and engineering, but 47.6% of the submissions in arts and humanities. Conversely, journal articles constituted 93.8% and 95.4% of the submissions in science and in engineering, respectively, but only 32.1% in the arts and humanities.[3] For this reason, bibliometrics do not capture the majority of principle publications in humanities disciplines, and hence an assessment project that foregrounds this method is fundamentally flawed. From the statistics drawn from the 2008 REF exercise, a UK Governmental report concludes that: "In the social sciences, humanities, and arts the typical output [of journal articles] is so low as to make bibliometrics only a marginal guide to research activity and hence only a possible very partial indicator of performance."[4]

This systemic inability of bibliometrics and citation indices to inform judgements on quality in the arts and humanities is further aggravated by specific, technical shortcomings. The first concerns the databases:

- There is no single journal list that gives an adequate coverage of the humanities. Recent research indicates, for example, that of the 5,197 journals listed in the ERIH, only 3,942 could be found in Ulrich's.[5]

- In the existing lists (AHCI, Ulrich's, ERIH, ERA, HCA etc) there is insufficient coverage of scholarship published in languages other than English.[6]

- The impact traced by bibliometric analysis is constrained within the boundaries of the academic community and does not register the impact of art historical scholarship on the broader society, for example, through high-quality museum publications.

A second major shortcoming is linguistic:

- The English-language monolinguism favoured by bibliometric analysis is entirely inappropriate to the arts and humanities, where great value is placed on linguistic particularity and difference. Research outputs are generally published in the language of the researcher or in that of the culture in which the research topic is located. In neither context is language a neutral vehicle. In the Hathi Trust collaborative repository of digital content from research libraries only 48% of the titles listed under the humanities are in English.[7]

A third area of shortcomings is societal:

- Bibliometrics are potentially discriminatory in that senior scholars will be most likely to have more citations.

- There is often a time lag before humanities publications are cited: knowledge in the humanities does not "age" as quickly as in the sciences and can take many years to enjoy a broad acceptance and exposure. Scholars at the forefront of research may wait years before the field as a whole begins to acknowledge the conceptual shifts that they have initiated.

- Early-career researchers and those with family commitments may take more time to appear on the citation radar, further emphasizing the different temporality of work in the humanities.

1.3 Bibliometrics and Art History

As a field within the humanities, art history has particular qualities that must be taken into account in any effective process of assessment:

- Bibliometrics are particularly discriminatory to art history, as less than 10% of art history publications are online, largely due to problems of rights and reproduction permissions.

- Art history is by nature interdisciplinary and constantly evolving, yet emerging fields, innovative approaches, and interdisciplinary research that resist categorization as a field in the data bank are excluded from bibliometric analysis.

- In addition to monographs, journal articles, anthologies, translations, commentaries, dictionaries/lexicons, conference proceedings, and source editions, there are vehicles of scholarship specific to art history: these include exhibition catalogues, collection catalogues, catalogues raisonnés, videos, curatorship, online exhibitions, etc., which do not register in the journal-based data banks.

2 PEER REVIEW

The difficulties of relying solely or primarily on bibliometrics as articulated above lead us to advocate the use of peer review as still the most effective means of judging quality and impact for work in art history. Looking at peer review critically reveals its possibilities and limitations as the primary mode of assessment. The following addresses aspects of peer review as it now exists, and proposes principles and standards for best practices.

2.1 Negative Aspects of Peer Review

Peer review is not a perfect system; it is based on human endeavour and cannot, for that reason, be considered infallible. As noted in a British parliamentary report of 2011, the obvious dangers are:

- Personal and institutional favouritism.
- Gender bias.
- Unconscious bias against people with exotic or foreign-sounding names.
- A tendency to stifle innovation and perpetuate the status quo.[8]

2.2 Positive Aspects of Peer Review

In spite of the shortcomings indicated above, robust peer review is the most effective, equitable, and ethical method of evaluating the quality of scholarly work in the humanities. In a rigorous peer review process, judgments about quality must be backed up with reference to specific evidence and based on articulated standards. The reviewer addresses the complexity of the argument through knowledge of the discipline and with reference to the wider field of debate. Through the reference to the collective dialogue, humanities scholarship can be most effectively defined qualititatively and in reference to impact.

2.3 Principles of High-Quality Peer Review

The terms under which the peer review is to be conducted should be made clear at the outset to both researcher and reviewer, and both parties should formally agree to these terms.

The use of open review, single-blind review (where applicant is not identified) or double-blind review (where neither applicant nor reviewer is identified) should be stated explicitly at the outset.

Customarily peer review should be considered service to the field: there is an expectation that active researchers will also act as reviewers.

The "burden" of peer review should not rest solely on senior figures in the field but should be spread as widely as possible.

The composition of peer review panels should explicitly guarantee the diversity appropriate to the work under review.

For art history, the skills called on for a varied peer review panel might consist of experts drawn from:

- A broad spectrum of universities and colleges, differing according to size, location, and expertise at local, national, and international levels.
- Museums of different sizes and with varying collections.
- Research institutes.
- Governmental and independent arts organizations.
- Independent scholars.

They would be at different stages in their careers, but would generally have a doctoral degree or comparable distinction in the arts and/or scholarship, and would cover not only the more traditional areas of art history but such fields as:

- Visual culture.
- Material culture.
- Gender studies.
- Photography and lens studies.
- Video.
- Interdisciplinary research.

2.4 Identification of peer reviewers

The fairness and success of the peer review process depends entirely on the identification and employment of suitably-qualified reviewers. There are several mechanisms for doing this, which include:

- Nomination by appropriately-qualified bodies and individuals: a standard procedure that guarantees expertise but brings a tendency towards conservative judgements.
- Self-nomination: a call on a website, or to discussion groups, offers a wide dissemination of the call, reassuring the constituency that the process is open. It may not, however, always yield the most desirable reviewers.
- In the context of recurring grants, fellowships, or similar, former grant-recipients can be invited or required to participate in peer review for a specified period.
- Searchable registry of potential reviewers administered by such bodies as CAA, RIHA, and national art history associations charged with maintaining the

integrity and quality of the discipline: tagging could identify fields of expertise, language skills, etc.

2.5 Standards for Good Peer Reviews

- Peer reviewers should adhere to guidelines developed for a narrative assessment.
- Peer reviewers must justify their judgments, which must be based on evidence.
- Peer reviewers must deliver their reviews in accordance with pre-determined deadlines.
- Peer reviewers should follow guidelines for appropriate length, both maximum and minimum.
- Peer reviewers should be willing to share their judgments at the appropriate moment with other reviewers.

2.6 Ethics

- Reviewers must state conflict of interest: personal relationship; supervisor/advisor; same institution; collaborator.
- Privacy and the intellectual property of the applicant must be protected: reviewers should sign an agreement to keep this material and his/her identity confidential.
- Reviewers should not disseminate any part of an applicant's material in his/her own work.
- Reviews should be used exclusively for the purpose written.
- Responses should be respectful.

2.7 Evaluation of Peer Review

Post-hoc evaluation of peer-review and of impact-assessment is highly desirable, and could be conducted on a cross-institutional basis, with one journal, grant-giving body, government funding agency or similar institution sharing reviews with a comparable enterprise for a process of cross-evaluation. RIHA could potentially act as a clearing house for such initiatives.

3 RECOMMENDATIONS

- As a matter of guiding principle, quality of output should be privileged over quantity. No interests are served by the excessive production of mediocre scholarship.
- Bibliometrics and numeric measures for quantifying research should not be used for assessment purposes for scholarship in the humanities.
- There is, however, some limited scope for citation information to be used to inform expert review in specific areas, such as technical art history.

- In order to guarantee a fair and equitable outcome for the evaluation process, a variety of instruments should be employed and must reflect the particular and evolving topics under review.
- The standard for quality should be determined and articulated by scholars actively engaged in the field and conveyed to the relevant assessing body.
- For peer review, clarification of the process for both the reviewer and the board should be established through a set of guidelines that will guarantee consistency, transparency, and rigor. The template should take into account local prerequisites and variables within subfields. Providing reviewers with a template will offer the additional benefit of streamlining the process and alleviating the burden of peer review. With a more streamlined process the pool of potential reviewers will grow.
- Peer review panels should be diverse in composition and should include both specialist and generalist expertise.
- A registry of peer reviewers should be established, international in scope and tagged with fields of specialization.
- Peer reviewers should receive feedback on their judgements from the commissioning agency, particularly when the process involves multiple reviewers.
- Upon conclusion of the process, peer reviewers should be self-reflective and suggest critical revisions to maintain the quality and rigor of the assessment project.

4 CONCLUSION

It is clear from the above that bibliometrics, citation indices, and similar measurements of impact cannot act as proxy measures for the quality of scholarly outputs in the humanities. It is imperative, therefore, that scholars and administrators in Art History and Visual Culture — in their broadest definitions — should work together to devise and apply robust and independent models for assessment that are clearly articulated, fair, and adaptable. This should be grounded on peer review, adapted and modified to suit the individual circumstance.

It is resolved that RIHA endorses the importance of peer review in assessment of quality in the humanities, rejects any monolithic reliance on citation indices and other similar measurement instruments, and approves the recommendations indicated in this statement.

Agreed unanimously at the RIHA Annual Assembly, Prague, 11-12 November, 2011, by the directors and representatives of the following RIHA institutes:

Bibliotheca Hertziana — Max-Planck-Institute für Kunstgeschichte, Rome
Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, Washington, D. C.
Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA
Courtauld Institute of Art, London
Danmarks Kunstbibliotek, Danish National Art Library, Copenhagen

Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte (Centre allemand d'histoire de l'art), Paris
The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles
Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, Paris
Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique – Koninlijk Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium (IRPA-KIK), Bruxelles/Brussel
Ústav dejín umenia SAV (Institute of Art History of Slovak Academy of Sciences), Bratislava
Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk (Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences), Warsaw
Ústav dějin umění (Institute of Art History), Prague
Institut Za Povijest Umjetnosti (Institute of Art History), Zagreb
Instituto Amatller de Arte Hispánico, Barcelona
Institutul de Istoria Artei "George Oprescu" ("George Oprescu" Institute for Art History), Bucharest
Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury (International Cultural Centre), Krakow
Kommission für Kunstgeschichte an der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna
Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, Florence
MTA Müvészettörténeti Kutatóintézet (Research Institute for Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences), Budapest
Nationalmuseum (The Nationalmuseum of Fine Arts), Stockholm
Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD, Netherlands Institute for Art History), Den Haag
Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft (SIK-ISEA), Zurich
Umetnostnozgodovinski inštitut Franceta Steleta, Znanstvenoraziskovalni Center, Slovenske akademije znanosti in umetnosti (France Stele Institute of Art History, Scientific Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts), Ljubljana
Visual Arts Research Institute Edinburgh (VARIE), Edinburgh
The Warburg Institute, London
Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, München

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[1] Peter Weingart, "Evaluation of research performance: the danger of numbers", in *Bibliometric Analysis in Science and Research* (Jülich: Forschungszentrum Jülich: 2003), p. 8.
[2] Simon Sommer, "Bibliometric analysis and private research funding", *Ibid.*, p. 220.
[3] Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), *Report on the pilot exercise to develop bibliometric indicators for the Research Excellence Framework*, Sept. 2009. (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_39/), p. 160, table H.
[4] *Ibid*., p. 154.
[5] Diana Hicks, *Towards a Bibliometric Database for the Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2009 (http://works.bepress.com/diana_hicks/18), p. 6.
[6] *Ibid*., pp. 12-13.
[7] Hathi Trust Languages (http://www.hathitrust.org/visualizations_languages), 14.08.11.
[8] House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, *Peer Review in Scientific Publications, Eighth Report of Session 2010-12* (London: Stationery Office, July 2011), pp. 15-18.