

The Publishing Game

The dubious mission of evaluating research and measuring performance in a cross-disciplinary field

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Abstract

Sport is a cross-disciplinary research field in which, similar to other fields, the axiom publish or perish dominates. Despite differences in scientific publishing cultures, researchers of a cross-disciplinary spectrum like sport science are often subjected to a single performance measurement regime. By using Denmark as a case, this paper critically examines how scientific contributions are validated and evaluated, and subsequently how academic performance is measured and ranked in a cross-disciplinary research field. Drawing on critical realism, the claim is that the interplay between national performance indicators, multiple stakeholders and certain journals' editorial practices within the sport sciences undermines peer reviewing as our core procedure to ensure high academic quality standards. By emphasizing the fight for research autonomy and rather than rejecting peer reviewing per se, proposals for an extended reviewing practice and quality criteria that goes beyond ranking systems are suggested.

Key words: scholarly publishing, scholarly journals, peer review standards, Bibliometric Research Indicator, performance management, sport sciences, case study, critical realism, publish or perish

A major challenge that scholars face today is the duty – some will perhaps say the pressure (Macdonald, 2015) – to publish in peer reviewed journals. This is summed up by the axiom *publish or perish* (McGrail, Rickard & Jones, 2006). This affects the science of sport and highlights a number of questions, challenges and controversial issues facing a cross-disciplinary research field that is often on the organizational level hosted by sport departments but simultaneously containing several elements from multiple scientific cultures. Controversies between disciplines are a well-known topic related to inter- and transdisciplinary research fields (Langfelt, 2006; Klein, 2006). One can argue that the contemporary journal publishing agenda favors natural and medical science cultures as, first, they lack the tradition of writing monographs and book chapters; second, they refer to a positivist methodology paradigm as opposed to the controversies conditioned by the methodological pluralism of social science; and third – and perhaps more conspicuously – the number of authors of each article in medical and natural science publications is higher in comparison. Thus, article writing favors the laboratory teamwork culture and can perhaps indicate the existence of medical and natural sciences hegemony, both in terms of how we publish, where we publish and how social scientists behave and present their work as if it must be convertible to fit into a positivist medical and natural science regime. On the other hand, social scientists can take advantage of a broader spectrum – writing articles, chapters for books, and monographs. Fewer authors per paper make it easier to uncover who *really* is the architect of the study at hand. Despite significant differences in publishing culture, researchers in a cross-disciplinary spectrum like sport science are often subjected to a single performance measurement regime based on journal ratings, although ranking journals and defining quality criteria are controversial policy issues (Pontille and Torny, 2010). The potentially conflicting and unequal inter-relations between research paradigms are not an isolated topic in sport science only. As recently pointed out by Ulrike Felt in her paper about the EU Horizon 2020 program (2014), she has observed that “SSHs [Social Science and Humanities] are portrayed as crucial for attaining the innovation goals, yet are conceptualized as the junior partners; the leading role remains with science and engineering” (p. 385). Hence, this paper critically examines current research validation, evaluation and performance measurement techniques by linking a case from Denmark to certain international publishing and editorial trends within the community of sport science. Based on identified potential shortcom-

ings within the sport science culture and the practice of publishing, and by critically emphasizing the structural mechanisms surrounding and framing academic publishing, the paper aims at discussing and answering the following two main questions: How are scientific contributions (primarily within the social sciences of sport) validated and evaluated, and subsequently, how is academic performance measured and ranked in a cross-disciplinary research field such as sport? How does scientific culture influence science production, and do we need to look beyond such cultural regimes for alternative practices of research validation?

Accordingly, this paper basically addresses some of the cultural circumstances under which we generate, produce, assess, and validate our scientific publications. The paper departs from a social science of sport tradition and is embedded in a critical realist approach to publishing and knowledge creation. Insights from contemporary discussions on research ranking and quality assessment, the economics of publishing, as well as a review of how the social sciences of sport have approached publishing and performance measurement form the next section of this article. In order to answer the two main questions, the study uses a Danish case to illustrate how recent radical changes in Danish research policy have been inspired by New Public Management, bibliometric research indicators, and global trends of creating performance-based funding systems. The interplay between a new national research policy and international publishing practices is the point of departure for a critical examination of cases containing potential shortcomings within the sport science research community. A central claim in this paper is that these national policy changes should be seen in conjunction with the global role of commercial publishers and the increased importance ascribed to journal and university rankings. The final section uses this case to frame a proposal for defending research autonomy, peer review practices and definitions of quality. It emphasizes both the possibilities and constraints linked to these performance measurement techniques, and suggests an approach that extends (rather than rejects) existing regimes.

Insights into the Literature

Beyond the impact factor and current challenges for peer reviewing

In an era of performance measurement, investigating the cultural circumstances under which we produce knowledge and estimate its quality is an often discussed topic in various academic disciplines:

As Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Nature*, I am concerned by the tendency within academic administrations to focus on a journal's impact factor when judging the worth of scientific contributions by researchers, affecting promotions, recruitment and, in some countries, financial bonuses for each paper (Campbell, 2008, p. 5).

A journal's *impact factor* is announced in the annual Thomson Reuter's *Journal Citation Report* and reports the average number of times articles published in the previous two years have been cited in a given year. Accordingly, the value does not measure individual articles, nor does it say anything about quality, but the annual report nonetheless attracts significant attention – in particular by commercial publishers and university administrations (Macdonald, 2015). In a similar way, growing emphasis has been placed on journal ranking lists, thus excluding other forms of publishing such as books (Willmott, 2011), and the consequence has often been that articles published in top-tier journals receive massive citations just because they are published in high-ranked journals. Within the management discipline, Starbuck (2005) has emphasized that publishing in top-tier journals seems to be a consequence of an administrative choice. One might therefore, like Gerald Davis, editor of the management journal *Administrative Science Quarterly*, ask the fundamental question: “Why do we still have journals?” and he goes on to argue that “the core technology of journals is not their distribution but their review process” (Davis, 2014, p. 193). One consequence – and this basic assumption is shared by the author of this paper – is that we need to take a look at how the peer review process is organized when we evaluate the journals. Some journals prioritize a swift process focusing on reporting results based on the sound use of methods, while others in addition recommend and practice theoretical rigor and a genuine overview of what goes on in the field. Peer review is an essential cornerstone of our profession as the assessment, evaluation, inputs, and eventually a ‘rejection or acceptance’ recommended by anonymous peer scholars are considered the best way

of ensuring and upholding research quality carried out by researchers themselves. It is, however, not at all without its problems, and several critical objections can be raised (Macdonald, 2015). Peer reviewers are not necessarily knowledgeable about the topics they review, and thus their comments do not always represent an appropriate evaluation and may lead to erroneous rejections (Tsang, 2013) – or, to be published, one has to slavishly follow the reviewers, which is a procedure that has been compared to prostitution (Frey, 2003).

The Economics of Publishing

By asking “Do we have something to say?” Alvesson (2012) outlines several of the challenges (e.g. promotion structures in academia, sub-tribalism, narcissistic meaning, overproduction of research, etc.), which the practice of publishing is facing and affected by today. Often research is transformed to ROIsearch, where return-on-investment becomes crucial, rather than drawing attention to creating knowledge that is meaningful for others. Others (Striphas, 2010; Beverungen, Böhm and Land, 2012; Harvie, Lightfoot, Lilley & Weir, 2012; Tienari, 2012; Macdonald, 2015) have drawn critical attention to the role of commercial publishing houses. Publishing journals is simply a very lucrative business endeavor for a number of reasons clearly outlined by Striphas (2010): The researchers do the majority of work (produce the manuscript, edit it and conduct the quality control through voluntary peer review), thus leaving the commercial publishers with few labor expenses. At the same time, the very same researchers are structurally dependent on digital access to these journals due to a competitive publishing game, and as a consequence, in an oligopolic publishing market the price for digital journal access can rise tremendously. The more researchers ‘benefit’ from the services provided by publishers (typesetting, indexing, alerts, marketing and occasional shares given to academic societies from for-profit publishers such as for the European Association of Sport Management by Taylor & Francis), the more legitimate higher prices seem to be, despite the fact that universities end up not only paying the salaries of the researchers but also, subsequently – through their library budget – buying the product produced by their own employees. Simultaneously, copyrights are often handed over automatically to the commercial publisher, thereby rendering free public access impossible (unless open access is paid for, of course). This peculiar, and yet highly profitable, international circu-

lar system needs to be addressed and taken into consideration when we evaluate publishing and national research policy. Since researchers play a significant role within these conditions of production, we need not see ourselves as distinct from the process, but as part of it as we are the consumers and the producers of – as well as those who benefit from – scientific journals (Striphas, 2010). This more than ever necessitates a critical examination of our own role in the conditions of academic knowledge production.

Social science of sport and publishing

This study originates from a social science of sport tradition. Accordingly, drawing on the above insights that publishing, the validation of research quality, and journal ranking, as well as the economics of publishing, are topics to be critically discussed in a variety of disciplines ranging from management and cultural studies to medicine, a systematic review was conducted of literature in the social science of sport¹.

While the period between 2000 and 2009 occasionally provided articles that dealt with publication practices and research policy, there seems to have been increased interest in aspects of this topic over the past four to five years. Recently, two of the nine journals included in this review have dedicated special issues to problems facing the position of the social science of sport: ‘Evidence, Knowledge, and Research Practice(s)’ (*Sociology of Sport Journal*, Issue 3, 2013), and ‘Position and relevance of sport science’ (*Sport in Society*, Issue 10, 2014). This can be interpreted as a growing interest in discussing and reflecting upon the position of the social science of sport in academia. The literature review roughly identified three main categories (see table 1), although overlaps occur: i) *topics and tendencies within and impact of the research fields*; ii) *the position of the*

1 Nine of the leading social science sport journals (primarily representing sport management and the sociology of sport, namely *Sport, Education & Society*, *Sport Management Review*, *Journal of Sport Management*, *European Sport Management Quarterly*, *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *Sport in Society*, and *Leisure Studies*) were screened issue by issue (by article title and abstract) in the period from January 2000 to November 2014, including online first publications. Many of these journals are official journals of scientific societies; hence, they are also supposed to reflect trendsetting discussions in these international academic fora. In addition, a literature search was carried out (on November 3rd, 2014) using the database *SportDiscus*. Finally, additional references in articles identified during the two phases specified above were also used for the review (similar to a snowball sample).

social science of sport vis-à-vis natural/medical sciences; and iii) social science of sport production and knowledge use.

TABLE I *Social science of sport literature review*

<i>Level</i>	<i>Primary focus point</i>	<i>Studies</i>
Topics and tendencies within and impact of the research fields	Examining the development of specific research fields	Shilbury & Rentschler (2007), Quatman & Cheladurai (2008), Santos & Garcia (2011), Shilbury (2011a, 2011b), Ciomaga (2013), Gau, (2013), Ciomaga, (2014), Dart (2014).
The position of the social science of sport vis-à-vis natural/medical sciences	Tensions between opposed cultural scientific traditions	Maguire (2004, 2011), Andrews (2008), Silk, Bush & Andrews (2010), Atkinson, (2011), Silk & Andrews (2011), Bairner (2012), Evans & Davies (2014).
Social science of sport production and knowledge use	How the social science of sport is produced and used in society	Jarvie (2007), Bairner (2009), Dart (2013), Giardina & Laurendeau (2013), Weedon (2013), MacLean (2014), Schneider & Williams (2014)

Since 2000 several contributions, first and foremost in the field of the sociology of sport, have dealt with the relationship between the social sciences and the medical/natural sciences (Maguire, 2011). Andrews (2008) argues that the development in the field of kinesiology has created a hierarchy that favors quantitative over qualitative methods, predictive over interpretative ways of knowing, and privileges positivists over post-positivists. Such diagnoses have led to critical discussions about the current trend of embedding social science in a frame of evidence-based research and about the importance of re-thinking research quality (Silk, Bush & Andrews, 2010) in which some argue that Physical Cultural Studies should be a future frame for the social science of sport in order to overcome the possible demise of the sociology of sport (Andrews, 2008; Atkinson, 2011; Silk and Andrews, 2011) In a related discussion, Bairner (2012) has argued against the tyranny of natural sciences and simultaneously for acceptance from mainstream sociology and addressing its own shortcomings:

An agenda exists which favors the natural sciences over the social sciences and humanities. That is a fact of academic life [...] it is crucially

important that the sociology of sport be defended against the tyranny of the natural sciences. This project, however, must not be disaggregated from the requirements to fight for greater acceptance from mainstream sociology and to address our own shortcomings by extending the sociology of sport in potentially exciting ways (Bairner, 2012, pp. 114-115)

As part of the reflections on the role of sociology of sport in relation to the natural/medical sciences, the introduction to the *Sociology of Sport Journal's* 2013 special issue prompted an invitation to “animate debates with and foster dialogue about evidence, knowledge, and research practice – debates that we see lacking in and among our formal avenues for disseminating research in the field” (Giardina and Laurendeau, 2013, p. 239). Hence, several of the contributions have in common that they all reflect upon how we produce knowledge and how this knowledge subsequently is used in the public debate. In a recent and very interesting paper, Dart (2013) has interviewed several former editors of leading sociology of sport journals about their role and experience with peer reviewers. This study allows us to gain some insights from the engine room of the publication process: for instance, how to maintain the position of a journal; the editorial skills required for such diplomacy; and the challenges from open-access solutions. One conclusion drawn is that “what is evident from the interviews is a growing tension between academic researchers, their institutional libraries and journal publishers” (Dart, 2013, p. 19). This refers to the fact that leading journals within this sub-field are all published by for-profit organizations although the arrangement is based on altruism, i.e. freely given labor. Yet a critical discussion within sport science of how we produce and validate our research in relation to commercial publishers, external stakeholders, multiple and often contradicting scientific cultures, and performance measurement indicators that are part of national research policy, seems to be under-prioritized. This review will be the point of departure for the case study presented here.

A Critical Realist Perspective and a Note on Methodology

At a very first glance, journal publishing implies an author and a journal editor, but as indicated in the literature review above, several other actors are involved in the process: anonymous reviewers, editorial boards,

commercial publishers, an audience, faculty heads, university administrators, bodies providing financial funding, policy makers – to name but a few. The following case study is based on a critical realist understanding of academic publishing and will be underpinned by epistemological and ontological foundations derived from a critical realist perspective. Bearing this theoretical perspective in mind, academic publishing can be perceived as a social act – a publishing game – embedded in structural and cultural conditions of production where researchers become both consumers and producers of the very same product. Using this view adds a perspective of power to the discussion of how to do research (see also Silk, Bush & Andrews, 2010), as the practice of publishing points towards a dialectical feature where “it also should involve our taking a more hands-on approach to solving problems of scholarly communication, instead of critiquing matters from afar and leaving the task of fixing things up to others” (Striphas, 2010, p. 18). Remaining critical means fighting for research autonomy, the possibility of opposing or resisting the regime of evidence-based management (Tourish, 2013), evidence-based research (Silk, Bush and Andrews, 2010), or the temptation to have your research orchestrated by powerful sport federations such as FIFA in order to justify the recent implementation of a program. In other words, critical sport research is about “question authority” (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2002, p. 11), which in this case includes questioning how we manage our share of the authority once we are part of the publishing game. Depending on the different stages of production we have some degree of authority as reviewers and editors whereas in other situations we can be ‘reduced’ to mere consumers of articles that our university libraries have bought expensive access to. We can easily criticize research policy and governance issues as they are laid out by politicians, but once we manage elements of policy ourselves we can – within the space available – challenge it, interpret differently, set our own agendas and standards, or simply decide to follow top-down recommendations blindly. However, the paper does not intend to create a myth about the past as a golden age of research (see for instance a fascinating study by Holden, 2015).

Approaching science production on a more meta-theoretical level, the idea is to position the paper between positivism and radical social constructivism. The underlying perception is that a reality exists independently of our knowledge of it (Sayer, 2004). However, contrary to a positivist approach, we cannot, as researchers, claim privileged access to the real world. Knowledge exists in a mediated and culturally embedded

way. At the same time, it is claimed that some kinds of knowledge are more plausible than others because the knowledge is based on rigorous theoretical and empirical work. This notion is out of keeping with some relativistic approaches represented in social constructivism where knowledge is merely seen as the outcome of social constructions. As a consequence of – and despite – the rejectionist approach to several contemporary attempts to measure and rank research quality, this paper argues that we are still able to distinguish between excellent and less excellent academic work. In a recent contribution Tourish (2013, p. 175), from a critical realist perspective, criticizes the trend of “evidence-based management” which shares similarities with the tendency of evidence-based research in sport science (Silk, Bush and Andrews, 2010). Rather than adopting its contrast (namely pure relativism), Tourish (2013, p. 182) argues in favor of “evidence-oriented organizing”. What is proposed in this paper is not an alternative, but rather an alternative approach (Borchner, 2000) which emphasizes the willingness to address our own shortcomings as well as a transformation, improvement and extension of existing practices. Following this argument, we can have the ambition of defining the most plausible quality of research – and we shall do so – well aware that this task is an ongoing process that is limited by social structures, power, and cognitive constraints.

The benefits and constraints of a case study

Using a case study is inspired by Flyvbjerg’s (2006) approach. A detailed descriptive study is supposed to provide insights and subsequently inspire other researchers to contribute with other case studies that add some substance to the debate. Otherwise, we stick to superficial diagnoses such as the publish or perish regime, the marketization of research, or the cultural dominance of the natural sciences. However, this study does not intend to enable formal generalization but attempts nonetheless to enter the “collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field or in a society” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 227) in the social science (of sport). A limitation of this paper is that it – unlike other Danish studies (Andersen and Pallesen, 2008; Jacobsen and Andersen, 2014; Opstrup, 2014) – does not investigate how Danish researchers react to performance management indicators and incentive systems; nor does it investigate empirically the experiences of sport journal editors (like Dart, 2013). Instead, it links and emphasizes the interplay between a local order represented by

Danish research policy, and a global context represented by commercial publishers and an international research community of sport (on inspiration, see also Paradeise and Thoening, 2013). Finally, as a single case study, it does not claim to contain a comparative perspective. However, elements of Danish research policy will most likely resemble policy models implemented in other European countries. Thus, the critique raised in this paper concerning policy must be sensitive towards the national context although it can inspire discussions and debate beyond a narrow Danish frame.

Analyzing the Case

Organizational changes and new public management in the danish university sector

Since the beginning of the millennium the Danish university system has undergone radical organizational changes (Aagaard, 2012). In 2003, the government launched its plan ‘From idea to invoice’, which grasps the essence of the process – to link university research and education to marketization (Bloch and Aagaard, 2012). This new era has critically been termed “post-academic science” (Jensen and Emmeche, 2012, p. 64) and, similar to other university reforms, was dominated by New Public Management ideas (Christensen, 2011). Between 2006 and 2012, a series of fusions were announced which directly affected the organization of the classical cross-disciplinary departments of sport sciences, leading to a process in which sport departments at the University of Aarhus and the University of Copenhagen merged with units representing a distinct public health agenda.

During this turbulent period the idea of monitoring research performance appeared (Mouritzen and Opstrup, 2014). In the 1980s, Danish research underperformed, but since 1990 there has been a steady increase in publications (Aagaard and Schneider, 2014). Accordingly, rather than arguing that monitoring research performance was necessary in order to save a sinking ship, monitoring became part of a performance-based research funding system (Mouritzen and Opstrup, 2014). For this purpose, the Bibliometric Research Indicator (BRI) was introduced. In the core policy document underpinning the BRI (Forsknings- og Innovationsstyrelsen, 2009) the purpose is explicitly “to improve the quality of Danish research and support behavior that furthers publishing in the

most recognized peer reviewed channels of publication” (p. 1, author’s translation from Danish). Since no formalized system of monitoring all university research outcomes had existed prior to the BRI, the model introduced in Norway some years earlier was adopted and modified – however with one significant difference: Whereas research outcomes monitored and evaluated according to the Norwegian research performance indicator only counted for 2% of the public funding allocated to the universities (Aagaard, Bloch and Schneider, 2015), the Danish BRI was, after an implementation period of three years, to determine how 25% of public funding should be distributed to the eight Danish universities.

The BRI distinguishes between two levels of research and was originally supposed to cover journal article publications, chapters in books (anthologies), and monographs (books). Peer review prior to publication is a key criterion. Level 1 publishing (the normal level) counts for 80% of all publications on a world scale while 20% involves Level 2 publishing (excellent quality, highest level). Journal articles at Level 1 receive one point whereas articles belonging to the second category receive three points. In a similar way, but more controversial and only launched after some obstacles had been removed, books at Level 1 are awarded five points and books at Level 2 eight points. According to the core policy document, the “indicator furthers a behavior that creates incentive to publish in the more prestigious journals and publishing houses” (Forskings- og Innovationsstyrelsen, 2009, p. 3, author’s translation from Danish). Sixty-eight sub-committees were formed and populated by senior researchers with each sub-committee representing a discipline, e.g. number 5 represents Linguistics. The task of these committees is, annually, to determine which articles and books belong to Level 1 or 2 and decide which journals and publishers are eligible for the BRI. The BRI has been heavily debated (Schneider and Aagaard, 2012), with the most radical critique coming from the Humanities (see, for example, Auken and Emmeche, 2010). Arguments raised (although not exhaustive) were: 1) Bibliometric measurements do not necessarily tell us anything about the quality of an article; 2) the BRI is a powerful instrument in changing the behavior of the individual researcher and can lead to a practice whereby collecting points is considered more important than conducting quality research, for instance by using a ‘salami technique’ in which the same data or case is chopped into many pieces, thus resulting in too many articles of too low a standard with a decreasing number of citations

(see the example from Australia in Butler, 2003); and 3) it favors traditions and cultures in which journal article writing is a dominant practice, i.e. not the Humanities, for example. It is difficult to estimate the effect of the BRI on research performance as many other factors will impact this behavior (Aagaard and Schneider, 2014) and also, since it was implemented in 2009, the current development will only represent a temporary status and does not provide for long-term effects. A recent publication (Ingwersen and Larsen, 2014) outlines how Danish research has increased since 2008, i.e. after the introduction of BRI². In general, there has been an increase in the number of articles in both Levels 1 and 2, and this increase cannot solely be explained by an increase in staff during this period. According to Ingwersen & Larsen (2014), the salami technique has not been used, which – according to the authors – is indicated by a similar increase in impact (increase in citations).

Ranking performance in an international cross-disciplinary field

One of the 68 sub-committees organizing the publication channel of the BRI is Committee Number 65, which covers sport science. It is one of the few cross-disciplinary committees. As listed in Table 2, there are 17 journals that belong to the upper category, Level 2. Of these journals, the *Sociology of Sport Journal* represents pure social science. Furthermore, the *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports* is a cross-disciplinary journal, albeit with a bias towards the medical/natural sciences.

TABLE 2 *Level 2 journals, Sport Sciences. Based on the version of the Danish Bibliometric Research Indicator dated 23.01.2015.*

Applied Ergonomics
 B M C Musculoskeletal Disorders
 British Journal of Sports Medicine
 Clinical Biomechanics
 European Journal of Applied Physiology
 Exercise and Sport Sciences Reviews
 Human Movement Science
 Journal of Applied Physiology
 Journal of Biomechanics
 Journal of Electromyography & Kinesiology
 Journal of Physical Activity & Health

² This study focuses on publications in Science & Technology, Social Sciences and Medical journals, and not humanities due to some of the early discussions on how to measure humanities with a book-oriented tradition. It also measures impact (citations) by using Web of Science; however, not all journals are integrated in this database.

Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology
Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise
Muscle & Nerve
Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports
Sociology of Sport Journal
Sports Medicine

This illustrates some of the structural limitations facing social scientists of sport. We must be aware that many scholars' individual publication strategies influence his/her paper submission strategy, for instance many scholars belonging to an academic society will often support their own journal regardless of category belonging. We cannot presuppose perfect market knowledge by authors³. But if you, as a sport management scholar, wish to publish in a Level 2 journal, you are either a) 'forced' to turn to generic management journals, b) orient your manuscripts towards Level 2 journals belonging to sub-fields of management like HRM, c) try to have it published in the *Sociology of Sport Journal* or d) draft the paper to suit a cross-disciplinary journal (the latter often implying doing quantitative studies, downplaying theory and making sure you stay within a limit of 4,000 words). Likewise, historians of sport and scholars of Physical Education (PE), as well as other sub-fields beyond sport, will not directly have a top-tier journal for their research. This recalls the suggestion made by Bairner (2012) that we should fight for acceptance within mainstream sociology. The Danish model simply forces scholars regularly to seek the best generic journals if they wish to publish in Level 2 journals. Looking at the Level 2 journals in sport science, one can argue that the selection reflects the dominance of the natural/medical sciences. In a cross-disciplinary field some sub-disciplines are not strongly positioned. Danish sociology and psychology of sport have longstanding publishing traditions while PE has not; thus, *Sport, Education & Society* does not belong to the top tier. This has not always been the case: This journal belonged to Level 2 in the 2010 version of the BRI; however, neither the *Sociology of Sport Journal* nor the *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* were ranked as a Level 2 journal at that time. The BRI is dynamic, and so are the relations and power structures underlying the fluctuating, tensile equilibrium constituting the selection of journals. The *Journal of Physical Activity & Health* was ranked as a Level 2 journal in 2014 for the first time, thus being an example of the growing emphasis of sport as a health issue.

3 I thank the first reviewer for this comment.

Special issues as shortcomings?

Besides the dominance of natural science and the challenge of fighting for greater acceptance within mainstream sociology mentioned by Bairner (2012), a further aspect is the necessity to address our own shortcomings. In this section, the way in which some special issues are managed and organized is perceived as a *potential* shortcoming. This critical approach is based on a fundamental assumption that blind peer review is the best (albeit not the perfect) procedure to uphold research quality. This entails that a manuscript subjected to peer review can either be accepted with no, minor or major revisions – or it can be rejected. The latter option will be emphasized here.

Roughly speaking, special issues can be organized in two ways. First, the guest editor or editors can launch an open call for papers, whereby submitted manuscripts undergo exactly the usual procedures of blind peer review. Second, the guest editor or editors can take care of a special issue, but contributors are recruited by networking or special invitation. The second option is worth scrutinizing as it raises a number of questions concerning peer review integrity. First of all, how are authors recruited? One can assume that often a guest editor will recruit within his/her own network. The next question is: Do these personally invited papers then undergo a similar rigorous and strict blind peer review process? If this is the case, it may potentially lead to a situation in which reviewers recommend rejection, which then leaves the guest editor in the precarious situation of having to personally reject the paper of an author he or she has personally invited to submit. Or are we dealing here with a loophole where, as a guest editor, you are able to invite scholars to submit papers, thus enabling an ‘easy way of getting published’ that to some extent circumvents the peer review process? This scenario, of course, is a little speculative, but in this era of publish or perish it is relevant to discuss how we produce and validate what is later published. Some real-life examples are mentioned here in order to show that some journals’ questionable publishing practices can have a negative impact once we start using the bibliometric research indicator.

Some journals within the field have specialized in producing special issues, mentioned briefly in recent publications (Dart, 2013; Weedon, 2013). The journal *Sport in Society* appeared three times in 2005, but by 2010 the annual number of issues had increased to ten, seven of which were special issues. In 2014 eight out of ten were special issues. The *International Journal for the History of Sport (IJHS)* has gone from publishing

three issues in 2002 to 18 issues in 2013, of which 13 were special issues. As far as the author knows, few of these special issues are outcomes of open calls for papers. According to its official website, the IJHS has specific guidelines for proposing special issues, so the practice is highly institutionalized⁴. In the case of these two journals the ‘special’ has been transformed into the ‘regular’ while a regular issue seems to be something special. An occasional practice of both these journals is, moreover, that one single author can produce a whole issue, i.e. be the sole author of all articles as well as the guest editor, or that the guest editor writes one or several articles in the volume s/he edits. An open question remains as to what extent the regular editors decide whether or not to publish these manuscripts – the worst-case scenario is that guest editors finally decide to publish their own contributions. A further practice of both journals is that a single issue can subsequently be transformed into a book without any significant revision of its journal style (also mentioned by Dart, 2013). Once published in a journal, the copyrights of the manuscripts are transferred to the publisher (Striphas, 2010) and by passing off a reprint as a book, publishers can convince readers that they are buying a genuine product – not a carbon copy.

Another version of a special issue that is not the outcome of an open call for contributions is the possibility of producing a supplementary issue. Let us take as an example the *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports*, a high-ranked Level 2 journal that under normal circumstances appears six times per year. In 2014, it published a supplementary issue entitled ‘Football for Health – Prevention and Treatment of Non-Communicable Diseases across the Lifespan through Football’. This supplement was supported by an unrestricted educational grant from the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). Perhaps it is not surprising that the Editorial, written by (now past and under suspicion for corruption) FIFA President J.S. Blatter and Chief Medical Officer J. Dvorak, concluded that:

4 For instance, it is specified under the guidelines for special issues that “The ‘final’ peer-reviewed and revised version of manuscripts should be made available to the RE [Reporting Editor] via Scholar One for comment and approval at least one month before the due submission date”. Retrieved 3rd June, 2015 from <http://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?journalCode=fhsp20&page=instructions#specialhttp://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=specialIssues&journalCode=fhsp20#.VG8hIE1oZVg>. It is interesting how the Reporting Editor enters in the publishing process, which gives the impression that the guest editor has de facto accepted a manuscript once it is made available to the reporting editor.

the supplement articles reveal that football has a great potential in the prevention and treatment of non-communicable diseases across the lifespan. Given that football is easy to organize as an intense and effective broad-spectrum type of training it shows a great promise in changing the habits of untrained people all over the world, creating adherence to a physically active and healthier lifestyle (Blatter and Dvorak, 2014, p. 2-3).

In the same Editorial the 16 papers of the supplementary issue are described as containing “convincing data to support the continued promotion of football as a health-enhancing leisure activity that improves social behaviour and justifies the implementation of the ‘FIFA 11 for Health’ programme ...” (Blatter and Dvorak, 2014, p. 2). At least one – but often several – of the authors of the articles is a member of the same university department, and the guest editors frequently figure as co-authors of many of the 16 articles in the supplementary issue. The issue is, however, accompanied by an editorial note, stating that in cases of “conflict of interest, manuscripts were handled by an independent member of the editorial board of the *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports*, and in all cases the final decision was taken by the Editor-in-Chief”. It is beyond the skills and capacities, neither is it the intention, of the author to assess and appraise the quality of these 16 articles. What is more interesting is that it seems possible to create a supplementary issue – financially supported by a grant from FIFA – in a leading journal and populate it with colleagues. For a researcher, it calls for critical reflection when closely engaging with the largest and most powerful (and perhaps corrupt) international sport federation, and 16 papers, three of which with a social science approach, are used to justify the implementation of a specific FIFA-program. One can imagine the following hypothetical scenario: The global sport-goods corporation Nike sponsors a supplementary issue of for instance the *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* on the topic: ‘The sport shoe industry as a model of Corporate Social Responsibility’. The guest editors invite scholars primarily from their own department, and the Editorial is written by Mark Parker, the CEO of Nike, who concludes that the articles justify the recent CSR programs implemented by Nike. As a scholar of sociology a fundamental doubt must be expressed that this is a wise path to follow for critically oriented social scientists.

Special issues and the bibliometric research indicator

The organization of a special issue that is not the outcome of open calls is an interesting phenomenon when we relate it to the rating system of the Danish Bibliometric Research Indicator. Both *Sport in Society* and the *International Journal for the History of Sport* are Level 1 journals. One published article in these journals is awarded one point. If you are the sole author of a whole issue, this may yield up to fourteen points. Subsequently, as these journals practice the art of transforming these issues into books, you can add another eight points because Routledge (part of Taylor & Francis who also publishes the two above mentioned journals) is regarded as a Level 2 publisher when it comes to books. In a similar way, editing and being included in a supplementary issue of the *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports* is attractive because of its rank as a Level 2 journal. Although the Bibliometric Research Indicator is formally used to allocate financial resources to universities *at the institutional level*, the individual researcher's capacity for having articles published in high-level journals undoubtedly has an impact on future career and evaluations for promotion. Thus, it is a fallacy to perceive the Bibliometric Research Indicator merely as an inter-organizational performance measurement tool – it has indeed the potential to benchmark individual performance. Furthermore, the BRI does not hinder points being given for books that are unoriginal remakes. As a consequence, we need to grasp publishing as more than a romantic relationship between a hard-working researcher and a journal untainted by commercial and political interests, although this view appears to be the dominant political conception in research policy. There is a reality level rooted in a national as well as international sphere in which structures created and populated by other powerful commercial players are present and influence publishing (see Figure 1). Thus, exposing these structural conditions enables us to grasp the complex conditions of science production in academia.

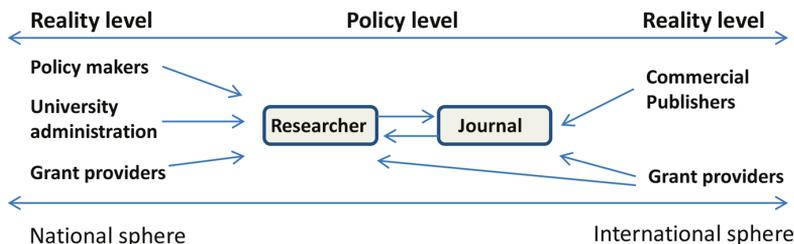


FIGURE 1 *The actor levels in the publishing game*

The Steps Forward – Some Proposals

The fight for research autonomy and the willingness to address one's shortcomings

As shown in this study, the Danish ranking system introduced by the Bibliometric Research Indicator seems to favor medical and natural sciences over the social sciences in sport studies, thus, confirming the assertion made by Bairner (2012). Yet, in general this regime differs from other ways of measuring research quality as it actually acknowledges the production of books and book chapters as well as journal articles, and it is sensitive toward other research traditions, for instance that the humanities and social sciences have their own journal rankings. When it comes to a cross-disciplinary research field such as sport science, the picture becomes blurred as this discipline is dominated by natural and medical science approaches. Another feature of the BRI is that scientists are integrated in the process of forming the performance measurement criteria, thereby creating a more transparent system than those established by commercial agents such as Thomson Reuter's Impact Factor or the Financial Times 45, often used in business and management studies. Despite these more positive aspects, however, the system still suffers from various flaws and deficiencies as it basically relies on the idea that one can measure quality just by grouping journal titles into categories. As such, this policy is in line with a global trend of scientific ranking (Willmott, 2011). One can argue that establishing criteria is a means of gaining freedom, limiting possibilities and resisting change, but these criteria are not culture-free (Bochner, 2000). The outline of contemporary criteria seems to reflect natural science domination and increased competition in global academia where administrative levels are eager to use top-tier journals as part of their organizational benchmarking, and it has become a way for politicians to promote a certain type of academic behavior by subsequently tying categorizations to the allocation of financial resources to universities. But because scientists are part of this process, as pointed out by Striphas (2010), it also leaves us with the possibility of modifying, improving and resisting some of these trends (Bochner, 2000). While the Danish Bibliometric Research Indicator contains a few improvements compared to using the impact factor as a quality measurement indicator, its real-life application and usefulness in distinguishing between good and excellent science is considered to be rather limited. First and foremost, this is because i) the selection criteria (whether Level

i or 2) seem to be random or in the case of sport science even dominated by natural science; ii) the potential ability to allow for commercial or powerful actors to have a decisive influence on journal article production exists; and iii) the publishing of journal reprints as books is awarded points. Therefore, a first step is to fight for research autonomy (e.g. by promoting researcher-driven open access; for instance the *Scandinavian Sport Studies Forum* hosted by Malmö University), while simultaneously addressing our own shortcomings such as uncritically following interests of powerful financial funding bodies and circumventing peer review. Part of fighting for research autonomy is also to insist on being critical, which should be a cornerstone for the sociology of sport (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2002). Hence this paper is also an invitation for a critical discussion about our own shortcomings.

Taking peer review seriously

The argument here is that peer review is the best means of preserving research quality. Having said so, this paper also acknowledges that peer review too has its flaws, for instance a tendency towards conservatism and lacking willingness to be innovative (see section ‘Beyond the Impact Factor and Current Challenges for Peer Reviewing’ earlier in this paper). Nonetheless, peer reviewing serves as an example of how we are part of the research production process rather than distinct from it. Although peer review can be exploited and misused to legitimize other purposes (Macdonald, 2015), the critique should not end with the conclusion that it does not work and has simply become a myth. But as exemplified in this paper, it also raises questions about how we manage this practice so that special issues, for example, do not develop into potential shortcomings. Instead, there are two good reasons for extending the way we organize peer review. *First*, peer reviewers are seldom recognized and credited for their efforts. Often the anonymous reviewer has (and this paper is no exception) a huge positive and beneficial influence on the outcome. Producing science is a dialogue, but the current system leaves no credits for the reviewer. Only the author is visible on the front page of the article. *Second*, the system occasionally lacks transparency. Since it is faceless and anonymous, it opens a gate for less constructive and unqualified reviewer comments. A future experiment might consist in accompanying accepted papers with a short reviewer comment produced once the paper has been accepted by the editor. This procedure maintains

the practice of (double) blind review before acceptance. Such comments could provide the reviewers' reflections on discussions during the review and resubmission process, add an outline of the potentials of the paper, and sum up the contribution the paper makes to its field. This procedure credits the reviewer for his/her work, provides insights into the knowledge production process by highlighting discussions and controversies, increases transparency and forces the reviewer to perform his or her best when commenting on the colleague's work. The claim is not that this experimental approach solves all shortcomings, for instance by regulating the power of external stakeholders, but it is by the author considered to be a way of taking peer reviewing more seriously.

A difference that makes a difference – qualitative assessment beyond ranking systems

Measuring research performance by the use of such tools as the Danish BRI system is at best quite harmless, and even a step forward because it recognizes sciences beyond the natural and medical sciences. Despite this, the very idea of measuring seems to rely on a natural science paradigm where counting, ranking and point allotment are equivalent to quality assessment. One negative aspect is that such measurement regimes aim at controlling behavior and may be misused once the academic hierarchy is reconsolidated, for instance when evaluating job applications. BRI cannot block research that seems to benefit from networking or circumventing peer review standards. However, the most important objection is that ranking does not measure research quality at all. This forces us to rethink the concepts of quality and impact in a more qualitative manner.

Impact is more than mere citations by other academics and is therefore considered more than something that can be measured solely by using bibliometrics. Impact is also how research can have an influence beyond academia, e.g. by provoking and stimulating policy makers, by having an altruistic perspective (e.g. football for peace building; see Sugden, 2010) or by setting the agenda for future generations of scientists. It is the claim here that sales of Coackley's book *Sport in Society – Issues and Controversies* (2014, now in its eleventh edition) has had much more impact on the social science of sport field than any journal article ever. Thus, textbooks that lay a solid foundation and provide inspiration for future scholars of sport must have high priority, but often these student textbooks are not credited and acknowledged by performance measurement regimes. Ac-

Accordingly, we must develop alternative, more qualitative-driven ways of understanding quality. The suggestion presented here, inspired by Bateson (1999 [1972]), is to conceptualize quality research as information understood as a difference that makes a difference. This urges us to look at the concrete context of how (or if) a single contribution makes a difference. Referring back to Bairner (2012), a contribution from the sociology of sport will most likely have something to say if it enters and makes a difference to mainstream sociology. Of course, one can argue that a mere quotation is not per se an indicator of quality (see, for instance, Macdonald & Kam, 2011) – often quotations are ritualized practices made to legitimize one's own work (a practice known from early institutional sociology, e.g. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Thus, we need to assess whether our work really makes a difference. Does it foster new ideas? Does it provoke? Does it stimulate new questions or question authority? The implication of understanding research quality as a difference that makes a difference is also that we abandon a narrow quantitative perspective of measuring the journal impact factor, distinguishing between Levels 1 and 2, and ceremonially celebrating the number of citations. Instead, we should try to alter the frames of understanding, which de facto means rejecting several of the mechanisms inherent in contemporary new public management and strive for a situation in which drawing attention to creating knowledge that is meaningful for others is placed in the foreground (Alvesson, 2012).

Concluding Remarks

Critical discussions on research production, the role of commercial publishers, performance management techniques, and the validation and ranking of science are present in a variety of disciplines. In the social science of sport this discussion has – with few exceptions – been absent, and there seems to be no studies that link national performance measurement techniques with international structural conditions of academic production and practices within our research community. Scientific contributions within sport science are formally validated on the basis of anonymous peer reviews, although some loopholes as exemplified in this paper seem to exist where one can critically question the rigor of this practice. Accordingly, validating contributions are not only a matter of a researcher-journal relation but is also under the influence of several other

factors including the role of grant providers and commercial publishers. Using a cross-disciplinary field as an example, this validation system is interrelated with and stimulated by the way academic performances are evaluated and ranked on a national policy level simply because benefitting from these loopholes enables (social science) researchers to take advantage of a performance measurement regime that is otherwise dominated by medical and natural science approaches to sport. Specific subcultural features, such as allowing supplementary journal issues to be sponsored by powerful sport federations, or duplicate publishing, influence science production, and as argued here, not necessarily in a fruitful way. Thus, we need to address our own shortcomings, take peer review more seriously, and think beyond ranking systems once we start estimating and assessing research quality. Accordingly, this paper is an invitation to future discussions about our science production in the era of New Public Management and the publish or perish regime.

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