Reflections: On Publishing

Evaluating otherwise: hierarchies and opportunities in publishing practices

DEREK RUEZ

Ruez, Derek (2017). Evaluating otherwise: hierarchies and opportunities in publishing practices. *Fennia* 195: 2, pp. 189–193. ISSN 1798-5617.

This short paper responds to the provocations set out in Kirsi Pauliina Kallio's recent editorial on 'Subtle radical moves in scientific publishing' and emerges out of my participation in a *Fennia*-organized panel at the 2017 Nordic Geographers' Meeting where participants reflected on the challenges and opportunities of creating a more equitable and pluralistic international publishing environment. Given the dominance of English language publishing in international academic work and the broader geopolitics of knowledge production through which some contexts, approaches, and modes of knowledge are regularly devalued, I suggest that – to the extent that publishing outlets are evaluated or ranked – they should be evaluated and ranked, in part, based on their contribution to a pluralistically international academy. This revaluation could help shape the informal assessments made by scholars in the context of hiring, funding, and other key decisions. It could also be integrated into more formal channels, such as within the deliberations of the boards who produce publication rankings in, for example, Finland's Publication Forum. Such a tactic need not preclude other work to contest rankings hierarchies and audit cultures as they advance the neoliberalization of academic work, but it does 1) suggest the importance of paying attention to what and how scholars value when we evaluate publishing outlets and 2) point toward the potential of critical and creative engagement with the range of processes (i.e. indexing, accrediting, measuring, ranking etc.) that surround and subsist within academic publishing.

Keywords: publishing practices, journal rankings, Anglophone hegemony, research assessment, geopolitics of knowledge

Derek Ruez, RELATE Centre of Excellence/Space and Political Agency Research Group, University of Tampere, Kanslerinrinne 1, Tampere FI-33014, Finland. E-mail: derek.ruez@uta.fi

Introduction

The publication of research and other kinds of critical and creative work is crucial to the unfolding of collective academic conversations and to the individual careers of scholars. As such, it would likely always be the site of some anxiety, but, in the current moment, the systems through which scholars publish their work have become the source of significant dissatisfaction within and beyond the academy. The paywalls behind which much scholarly work is housed limit access – particularly to those outside of the academy and without access to institutional journal subscriptions – at a time when many scholars, whether motivated by their own political commitments or by funding imperatives, seek to increase the

impact of their work beyond the academy. Meanwhile, large, for-profit commercial publishing companies extract profit from a process that involves significant public investment and tremendous amount of unpaid labor by academics. The contradictions and limits of the current models, while long visible, are increasingly prompting a range of changes, including funder and institutional mandates around publishing open access, new institutional and field-specific repositories, increasingly sophisticated file sharing infrastructures for bypassing paywalls, experiments in non-commercial publishing, and new forms of negotiation with publishers. The potential scale and impact of such shifts going forward calls for critical consideration by everyone engaged in academic work.

This period of flux in academic publishing and its controversies over access and value, while obviously important in their own terms, also represents an opportunity to consider how changing publication practices can move us in the direction of a more pluralistically international academy. Of course, scholars across a range of contexts are already facing pressures to produce work that responds to internationalization imperatives, but this often means publishing in in 'international' (i.e. high-ranking, English-language) outlets (Paasi 2015). As geographic discussions around Anglophone hegemony have made clear, the 'international', with its connections to the dominance of English, can and often does result in more provincial geographies and puts significant obstacles in the way of achieving a more pluralistically international academy (Garcia Ramon 2003; Germes & Husseini de Araújo 2016). The extent, contour, and implications of English-language dominance have been critically debated (e.g. Rodríguez-Pose 2004), but, however one might approach the question of English as a lingua franca, it seems clear that these dynamics contribute toward a situation where certain argumentative styles and theoretical frames are privileged over others and where important intellectual contributions may go unrecognized (Fall & Minca 2013; Fall 2014). I also follow Desbiens and Ruddick (2006: 4) in thinking that "to cast aside the question of language in geography" would be "to obscure those practices that do work to maintain various unequal power relations". Thus, there remains an uneven playing field that eases the way for some scholars, such as an Anglophone researcher like myself, while putting up obstacles in front of others.

The dynamics of language are, of course, only one part of the broader geopolitics of knowledge production in a plural and uneven world (Mignolo 2002; Timár 2004; Peake 2011). There are a growing number of projects that have emerged seeking to open up knowledge production in geography in new ways, including exciting work articulated around decolonizing geographic thinking (Sundberg 2014; Radcliffe 2017), provincializing hegemonically-universalized approaches and worlding subaltern urbanisms in urban geography (Roy 2009; Sheppard *et al.* 2013), and opening up new possibilities for collaboration and conversation across linguistic and material divides (Nagar 2014). Much of this work gestures toward the need for broad epistemic shifts and substantive political change in both the academy and the broader world. Building on Kirsi Pauliina Kallio's (2017) editorial on subtle radical moves in academic publishing, my goal here is to offer some further reflections on an area of publishing practices where potential interventions, even small ones, could be made toward creating a more pluralistically international publishing environment – as one modest step toward decolonizing the discipline.

Obstacles and opportunities

At the risk of stating the obvious, one important sticking point holding back efforts to create a more pluralistically international publishing environment is the existing system of incentives that tend to channel scholars into producing certain kinds of publications and submitting them to certain kinds of outlets. Due to the competitive nature of launching an academic career, early career scholars experience intense pressure to publish as much as possible in the 'best' journals possible. Often, 'best' is understood either in terms of formal metrics, like impact factor or national rankings systems, or in terms of a more diffuse, but still quite real, common sense within particular scholarly communities about the outlets that matter most. This pressure extends beyond the early career-stage, of course, although that is a particularly important moment, both in terms of the acute nature of the pressure and the way it helps set the stage for what follows. While the influence of metrics and the details of that scholarly common sense can vary significantly across contexts, the journals that matter in this

way are most often published in English and included as part of Web of Science (WoS) rankings (cf. Schuermans *et al.* 2010; Paasi 2013). This hierarchy of publishing outlets effectively narrows the kinds of approaches and contributions that are likely to be made.

I use the language of incentives and pressures, but, as others have pointed out (e.g. Kitchin 2005), it is more than that. Academics are not first neutral actors who then encounter these incentives, but rather subjects who have, in many cases, been trained and positioned to care about publishing in high ranking, international journals and who evaluate their own and others' scholarly credentials, at least in part, in relation to these publication records. Here, the production of academic subjectivities is central – as are questions of *value*, to name the interrelated issues of the economic value that is produced in academic publishing and the system of valuation that determine what publication venues are accorded the most status in communities in which that status is a key currency.

Kirsi Pauliina Kallio's (2017) articulation of the different steps and actors involved in the publishing process nicely provides a kind of road map toward potential areas of intervention in the publishing process. To that, I would add the *evaluation and ranking* of publishing outlets as an area where academics may be able to alter our own practices to move toward a more pluralistic and equitable publishing environment. Even as there are a variety of external pressures, I think it remains largely true "that it is academics themselves who decide what is 'valuable' and oversee many of the accounting systems that govern their practices" (Kitchin 2005: 12). I have in mind both the formal ranking exercises, such as Finland's Publication Forum or the Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers, as well as the ways that impact factors and more 'common sense' understandings of quality within particular fields affect how journals and the individual scholars who publish in them are evaluated by other scholars. In terms of formal ranking exercise, scholars themselves do not exercise independent control over whether and how these systems emerge, nor how the rankings are used, but they – at least the often-senior scholars who sit on advisory boards – do generally control the evaluation process that assigns rankings to particular journals. It is also scholars themselves who often do the more informal evaluating that reproduces a common sense about the quality and significance of particular outlets and applies that common sense to the evaluation of job candidates, funding proposals, and promotion prospects.

Among the more formal practices, the national accreditation and ranking systems for academic publishing outlets in Norway, Denmark, and Finland merit more critical attention (see Paasi 2013; Berg *et al.* 2016; Jones 2017). In Finland, for example, the Publication Forum ranks journals on a scale of 1–3, with a 3 being awarded to a small percentage of the highest quality and impact journals, and 1 being awarded to the largest number of journals that meet certain basic standards. The higher the ranking, the more a publication in that outlet is worth in terms of the distribution of public funding to the university. While these rankings are ostensibly not meant to be applied to individual scholars, it is difficult to imagine that they do not influence how particular publications, authors, and research groups are perceived and evaluated among themselves and in relation to university administrations.

The circulation of these mechanisms – for example, South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training adopted Norway's registry for use in its own accreditation exercises in 2016 – and the potential consolidation being pursued in the form of a jointly-maintained 'Nordic List' that aims to create a shared registry among the Nordic countries and potentially beyond together make these a potentially important point of intervention. Here, I suggest that those scholars who take on the work of evaluating publication outlets in this way ought to integrate into their considerations of quality and significance the extent to which the journal contributes to a more pluralistically international publishing environment. This is not just a form of positive discrimination, although it would be justifiable if it was, but a reflection of the intellectual value of creating a more pluralistic environment. The kind of contributions that could be recognized in this way would necessarily vary, but include much that has already been suggested in work responding to Anglo-hegemony or in the distinct but related project of decolonizing the academy. This could entail the publication of abstracts in multiple languages, the publication of original work in multiple languages, the translation of articles, the development of publisher and editorial policies that reduce barriers to publishing in English for those for whom English is not a first language, the publication of articles that build connections across scholarly (and other) traditions, and the highlighting of particular contexts, questions, or forms of

knowledge production that are underrepresented or devalued in the context of Anglo-hegemony and the broader colonial geopolitics of knowledge.

Evaluating differently

In advocating for a kind of critical engagement with ranking and evaluation of publishing outlets, what I have in mind is, in one sense, analogous to the kind 'conscientious engagement' with citation practices recently discussed by Mott and Cockayne (2017). To be sure, ranking and evaluating publication outlets is not actually necessary or productive for scholarly work in the way that citation is (and, indeed, is frequently counterproductive to such work—see Mountz *et al.* 2015; Berg *et al.* 2016). However, to the extent that ranking and evaluating remain an influential feature of the academic landscape, I suggest that it makes sense for scholars who have the opportunity to help shape these rankings to do so in the interest of creating evaluations that more accurately represent the value of, as well as contribute to, the creation of a more pluralistically international academy.

Such a tactic need not preclude other work to contest rankings hierarchies and audit cultures as they advance the neoliberalization of academic work, but it does suggest the importance of paying attention to what and how we, as scholars, value when we evaluate publishing outlets – a task which would likely not disappear entirely, even in the absence of neoliberalizing tendencies and competitive audit cultures. As debates about the dominant for-profit journal publishing model continue to unfold, I think it is critical to support efforts to imagine and pursue alternatives that can broaden access to academic work and challenge existing inequalities in knowledge production. Moreover, as much as possible of the value produced in academic work should be brought back into the hands of the scholars where it could support things like translation, which bring new arguments and approaches to broader audiences, or language services that help level the playing field for scholars working to publish in English. Scholars should also take this opportunity to critically ask what kinds of publication rankings, metrics, and citation indices, if any, do or should we actually value? What productive ends do they support in their current form? What ends might they be put toward? If we allow that there may be some scholarly use for some of these mechanisms – a point on which I am not altogether convinced in the case of rankings, although for citation indices the case is clearer – by whom and how should these be governed? What are the implications of having so much of this in the hands of private profit-seeking corporations, like Clarivate Analytics and Google? What are the possibilities for indexing, accrediting, measuring, evaluating, and ranking otherwise? That final question, which must also include the possibility of not doing some of those things – as exemplified by *ACME*'s longstanding refusal to be included in WoS rankings – is meant to gesture toward the need to think beyond producing better rankings and measurements, at least in the usual sense of debates about the importance of recognizing quality over quantity or the virtue of article-level versus publication-level metrics, and toward the potential impact of critically and creatively transforming the broader infrastructures that surround and subsist within our publication practices.

References

Berg, L. D., Huijbens, E. H. & Larsen, H. G. (2016) Producing anxiety in the neoliberal university. *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe Canadien* 60(2) 168–180. https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12261

Desbiens, C. & Ruddick, S. (2006) Speaking of geography: language, power, and the spaces of Anglo-Saxon 'hegemony'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1068/d2401ed

Fall, J. (2014) Writing (somewhere). In Lee, R., Castree, N., Kitchin, R., Lawson, V., Paasi, A., Philo, C., Radcliffe, S., Roberts, S. M. & Withers, C. (eds.) *The sage handbook of progress in human geography*, 296–315. Sage, London.

Fall, J. & Minca, C. (2013) Not a geography of what doesn't exist, but a counter-geography of what does: rereading Giuseppe Dematteis' Le Metafore della Terra. *Progress in Human Geography* 37(4) 542-563. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512463622

Garcia-Ramon, M. D. (2003) Globalization and international geography: the questions of languages and scholarly traditions. *Progress in Human Geography* 27(1) 1–5.

https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132503ph409xx

Germes, M. & Husseini de Araújo, S. (2016) For a critical practice of translation in geography. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 15(1) 1–14.

Jones, M. (2017) Can research quality be measured quantitatively? On quality of scholarship, numerical research indicators and academic publishing – experiences from Norway. *Fennia - International Journal of Geography* 195(2) 164–174. https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.66602

Kallio, K. P. (2017) Subtle radical moves in scientific publishing. *Fennia - International Journal of Geography* 195(1) 1–4. https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.63678

Kitchin, R. (2005) Commentary: disrupting and destabilizing Anglo-American and English-language hegemony in geography. *Social & Cultural Geography* 6(1) 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/1464936052000335937

Mignolo, W. (2002) The geopolitics of knowledge and the colonial difference. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101(1) 57–96. https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-101-1-57

Mott, C. & Cockayne, D. (2017) Citation matters: mobilizing the politics of citation toward a practice of 'conscientious engagement'. *Gender, Place & Culture* 24(7) 954–973. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1339022

Mountz, A., Bonds, A., Mansfield, B., Loyd, J., Hyndman, J., Walton-Roberts, M., Basu, R., Whitson, R., Hawkins, R., Hamilton, T. & Curran, W. (2015) For slow scholarship: a feminist politics of resistance through collective action in the neoliberal university. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 14(4) 1235–1259.

Nagar, R. (2014) *Muddying the waters: coauthoring feminisms across scholarship and activism.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana.

Paasi, A. (2013) Fennia: positioning a 'peripheral' but international journal under the condition of academic capitalism. *Fennia - International Journal of Geography* 191(1) 1–13. https://doi.org/10.11143/7787

Paasi, A. (2015) "Hot spots, dark-side dots, tin pots": the uneven internationalism of the global academic market. In Meusburger, P., Gregory, D. & Suarsana, L. (eds.) *Geographies of knowledge and power*, 247–262. Springer Netherlands, Dordrecht.

Peake, L. (2011) In, out and unspeakably about: taking social geography beyond an Anglo-American positionality. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12(7) 757–773. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2011.610245

Radcliffe, S. A. (2017) Decolonising geographical knowledges. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42(3) 329–333. https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12195

Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2004) On English as a vehicle to preserve geographical diversity. *Progress in Human Geography* 28(1) 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132504ph467xx

Roy, A. (2009) The 21st-century metropolis: new geographies of theory. *Regional Studies* 43(6) 819–830. https://doi.org/10.1080/00343400701809665

Schuermans, N., Meeus, B. & De Maesschalck, F. (2010) Is there a world beyond the Web of Science? Publication practices outside the heartland of academic geography. *Area* 42(4) 417–424. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2010.00938.x

Sheppard, E., Leitner, H. & Maringanti, A. (2013) Provincializing global urbanism: a manifesto. *Urban Geography* 34(7) 893–900. https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2013.807977

Sundberg, J. (2014) Decolonizing posthumanist geographies. *Cultural Geographies* 21(1) 33–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013486067

Timár, J. (2004) More than 'Anglo-American', it is 'Western': hegemony in geography from a Hungarian perspective. *Geoforum* 35(5) 533–538. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2004.01.010