

Measuring the Spirit? Bibliometrics and the Humanities

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Measuring the Spirit? Bibliometrics and the Humanities

Invited talk given at *ACUMEN Open Seminar* The 8th of March 2013, Royal School of Library and Information Science, Copenhagen

Sune Auken

One of the most important things I have learned as the Head of the PhD School at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Copenhagen is that the Humanities are so exceedingly broad that even understanding the general layout of humanistic scholarship is a major endeavor. So in speaking of the humanities as one collected entity I am fully aware that the mere scope of variation probably defeats the argument or at least parts of it.

Here are some of the major points connected to research evaluation within the Humanities. Now, I am a literary scholar and a specialist in genre but most definitely not a bibliometrician. So it is up to you to discover – or to know beforehand for that matter – what to do about them.

These points are not systematic at all. They may, however, prove rather tightly intertwined if you take a closer look.

The Scientific Trauma

The humanities have for a long time been treated as sort of failed versions of the sciences–this attitude even has a name: scientism. The sciences are so normatively strong in the description of what is and is not true scholarship that we are dealing with a situation which approaches a hereditary trauma–on both sides. Getting a scientist to grasp that the humanities are consistent and important fields of research can be a pretty exasperating affair–believe me I have been there. But getting the humanities researchers out of the trenches can be equally hard. So in order for bibliometrics to be even marginally acceptable within the humanities they need to be able to treat the humanities in a way that

reflect the differences between the two fields. Otherwise, the humanists will see this as yet another attempt at portraying them as failed scientists—and they will probably be right.

New problems with resource allocations by measure

A central point of research evaluation is helping decision makers distribute research resources. This wish is quite legitimate, but there are two central worries in relation to the Humanities – on top of all the other problems related to this endeavor: 1) as the resources available within the humanities are much much smaller than within the sciences, the point of diminishing returns is reached quite a lot sooner. The resources available for redistribution might be so small that the measuring itself is too heavy and time consuming to be worth the effort. 2) if the bibliometric effort is not specifically targeted at the humanities but is something developed to describe completely different publication patterns, they will have strongly adverse effects on the publication pattern as researchers—being no more saints than everybody else—will start following the money rather than the research.

The genres of humanistic research

I will only mention the strong position of the scholarly monograph in passing. Other people present are more coherently experts on that subject. However, I *will* mention that even if you perceive scholarly research in the humanities as something that takes place in articles *and* monographs you are being reductive as for instance archival, museal or philological work is crucial to humanistic scholarship as well as are all the other publication forms. Indeed some of the most important projects within The Danish humanities in latter years are philological nature: the work done in publishing scholarly acceptable editions of the work of Hans Christian Andersen and especially Søren Kierkegaard and N.F.S. Grundtvig. The movement from Kierkegaard to Grundtvig is particularly interesting, as *Grundtvig's Works* is going to be an Open Access web publication—thus marking a decisive transition in philology.

Research as public outreach in the humanities

Along the same lines but with a different consequence: Public outreach is different for the humanistic scholar than it is for the scientist. In the sciences the primary publication—the research paper—is in most cases utterly incomprehensible to a wider audience. This is not the case within many humanistic disciplines—not ALL disciplines, mind you, but many. In the humanities the primary research product will often be comprehensible or even an enjoyable read to the public at large, and thus it can communicate directly with the public without the need for intermediary texts. Sorry for bringing my own research to the forefront here, but it is actually a case in point. The Danish university system, like the German, has a sort of super-doctorate operating at a level over and above the PhD. My dissertation for this doctorate was a rather expansive thing of 737 pages of strict academic prose. Not the sort of publication you would expect anybody outside of academia to actually read unless they were absolutely bound to. It was, however, published by the major commercial publishing house in Denmark, Gyldendal, and though it probably did not make them a truckload of money, it did bring me a continuous series of public and popular lectures in a diverse series of contexts—but most of them, by far, with a predominantly non-academic public. Now my case was a particularly lucky one, but the tendency is clear enough. Humanistic scholars can do research and be understood by a broad public at the same time, and thus they are often willing to balance the two concerns in their work. As a consequence of this there is a continuum of genres within humanistic scholarship ranging from hardcore research articles to very popular and stylistically mild books that are all used for—and accepted as—research. And this connection to a reading and understanding public is one of the strongest legitimacies humanistic scholarship has. So any normative bibliometric approach that rules out one or more of these genres or demands certain safety measures applied in order to let something count will lead researchers to more traditional and accepted genres and thus away from their much more active interchange with the public. An attempt to use such a measure to get more research for your public research money could, thus, lead to a situation in which the public actually got less back from the university as the researchers boarded themselves up in a scholarly ivory tower

with a bibliometrically secured drawbridge of referencing, research assessments and peer review.

The ELF thing

Connected to this of course is the language question. The ELF–English as Lingua Franca–situation is not so dominant within the humanities as it is within other fields and bibliometrics have to consider this in evaluating the research output from the field. There has been a general move towards more use of English in the Humanities too, but there is no reason to assume–or hope–that this movement will ever be complete.

- The use of national languages in scholarship is part of what allows the Humanities to maintain such close relationships to the public also in non Anglophone countries. Since major parts of scholarship takes place in their mother tongue, the members of the public have an easier time familiarizing themselves with scholarship than they would ordinarily have.
- As the Humanities are dependent upon language in a manner not known within the sciences the performance of researchers is and remains hampered by having to operate in a second language.
- The subject matter is often in another language than English–this is evidently true in Language Studies but it is also clear when it comes to a number of other subjects, and often all scholars involved are easily able to understand that language, so in order to insist on English as *the* language of scholarship you basically have to let the scholars abandon a language which constitutes the subject matter AND is shared between all relevant scholars, in order to get them to write in English.
- Also: As a number of studies have demonstrated, usage of English as Lingua Franca is not an innocent endeavor as it leads to a prioritizing of Anglophone researchers and Anglophone points of view. Sharpened to the point of parody: Teaching practices at an elementary school in North Virginia are universal, political decisions in the parliament in Berlin are regional at best.

So: Should an evaluation choose to insist on only measuring or giving prioritizing weight to English language research the consequences will be rather dire.

The Authorship complex

One of the major differences between the humanities and the sciences is the structure of authorship. It has two different sides.

- Whereas scholarly articles in the sciences are collective endeavors with at least 3 or 4 and often many more authors, humanistic scholarship is still focused on the research author as an auteur—an independent voice gathering a number of differing but interrelated works around it. Taking away this authors voice in the humanities is taking away the identity of the researcher and of research. Collaborative efforts within the humanities have become much more common in later decades and the process will most likely continue. However, individual authorship is and will probably continue to be the norm. And given the individual character of the research voice in humanistic scholarship most researchers will insist on taking part of every single process within a scholarly work that carries their name on it.
- Given the diversity of the humanistic field and the limited resources available most researchers will have a much broader range of research subjects than their colleagues in the sciences. This is obviously beneficial to society at large as it allows society to have access to scholarly knowledge within a a much broader array of subjects than the limited budget spent on the humanities would indicate, but for the very same reason the chain publications connected to strongly specialized scientist remains beyond the grasp of the humanistic researchers.

I cannot even begin to fathom how to capture this intangible but very real phenomenon of the author's voice and the diversity of authorship in the humanities. One obvious consequence is that the number of publications associated with individual researchers is much smaller so if research output volume is used as a means of measurement,

humanistic researchers will tend to fail on the grounds that the scholarly structures within the field are different from the sciences.

The Longevity of Humanistic Research

Finally: The longevity of scholarly influence within the humanities means that a direct quote—ignoring or even trumping recent scholarship—to works 50 years or more back is an everyday occurrence within humanistic research. And 50 years may prove to be nothing at all: In a PhD course in early May I intend to open up a discussion of the relevance of a text by Aristotle in a field where it has never to my knowledge been used before (The *Categories* within the field of genre research where only the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* have had a role to play up to now). So the paths of influence are diverse, long ranging and very hard to track. Therefore, any measurement that seeks to assess scholarly work within the humanities on the grounds of effect will only have the full picture available after a long range of years. And this leads to something definitely self-defeating in the endeavor as the whole point of it was to get some sort of sense of what is going on right now, not 50 years ago.

In Conclusion

So, in conclusion: Attempts at measuring the spirit, measuring the *Geisteswissenschaften*, are faced with a number of challenges. These challenges must be addressed if such measurements are not to either run afoul of the researchers themselves or damage the very subject they are aiming to describe.