

Editorial

Knowledge produced by universities: a common good that requires the social responsibility of latin american academic journals

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The term “common goods” was coined to refer to natural resources whose abusive and/or uncontrolled use is causing ills to humanity: air, river water, forests, the ozone layer, etc. Subsequently, views emerged proposing that some social services (education, health care, etc.) and the collective creations of humanity (art, scientific knowledge, etc.) are also commons. The commons are “resources, which, beyond ownership or belonging, assume, by virtue of their belonging, assume, by their own natural and economic vocation, functions of social interest” (Subirats Humet, 2011, p. 196). These goods are different from other types of goods (private and public) because all people have the right to access them simply because they are members of society. Therefore, academics and academic journals should manage the knowledge produced in universities as a common good, which implies a social responsibility to ensure its quality, its social relevance and its unrestricted dissemination.

This type of asset is threatened by at least two phenomena. The first is appropriation by some actor (private or state), which limits or prevents universal access to them. The second is what has been called the “tragedy of the commons”, which Garret Hardin (1968) illustrated with a type of commons: communal grazing fields. When some herders selfishly increase the number of

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animals, the consumption of grass can reach levels that exceed, consumption of grass can reach levels that exceed the maximum the field can support to regenerate. The commons are threatened by the abusive or distorted use of the commons by some members of the community, damaging their quality, their functions and even their very existence.

These two phenomena are significantly affecting the knowledge produced in universities. International rankings and accreditation systems are now pressuring universities around the world to adopt performance standards designed by the agencies that construct the rankings and those that grant accreditation. Among these standards are those that refer to the publication of articles in academic journals: the higher the impact factor of the journal where their academics publish, the better the universities are ranked. This has led universities to put pressure on their academics to publish and, increasingly, to publish in the top-ranked journals in a very small group of international indexes. As a result, tenure, academic career development, access to research funding, and funding to attend conferences are increasingly dependent on how many articles academics publish in high-impact journals.

In this context, certain practices, promoted and applied mainly by the large publishing houses that publish academic journals, are generating these two phenomena. Let us begin with the first of these: preventing or limiting universal access to the knowledge produced in universities. As a common good, this knowledge should be freely accessible. However, such access is being severely limited by large publishers who charge to read articles published in their journals, and by many well-indexed journals that charge a fee to read articles published in their journals and sometimes charge authors. Some universities do not have the funds to finance access to the former's databases, nor to pay for their researchers to publish in the latter's databases. Charging to read articles limits the equal access of members of the academic community to the knowledge produced by their own members, and the fee charge to publish prevents the dissemination of an important part of the knowledge produced in universities. This strongly affects the knowledge generated by Latin American academics, because many universities in this region have difficulties in purchasing all the databases and very few have the funds to pay for their researchers to publish.

On the other hand, a set of widespread editorial policies, which are fed back into the way journals are rated by the indexes, are generating the "tragedy of the commons". In this case, the misuse of the commons by its producer-consumers (academics) is strongly induced by these editorial policies. Let us see how this works. The ratings assigned to each journal by the indexes are based exclusively on quantitative indicators of little relevance to science (number of citations, age of citations, etc.), and not on relevant aspects (the topics covered in the articles, their contribution to the field of research, their contribution to the improvement of society, etc.). This has led journal editors to a tendency to select the articles that generate the best scores in these indices, for which they have adopted a set of practices that affect the common good character of

the knowledge created in universities. These include: over-emphasis on all formal aspects, greater importance given to the methods used than to the substantive contribution of the research methods used rather than the substantive contribution of the content (the more sophisticated the statistical techniques, the more valuable the article is), prioritization of articles with empirical research results rather than theoretical ones, strongly standardized evaluation criteria that reviewers must use, requirements regarding the bibliography used (pressure to include recent articles and, in some cases, articles published in the same journal), and the adoption of English as the preferred language (in order to obtain more citations).

The negative consequences of these editorial policies have been denounced by leading academics. One of them is the homogenization of research, as authors adapt the content, theoretical approaches and methodological authors adapt content to the preferences of reviewers and editors. This affects the development of scientific knowledge because it “reduces the space for new ideas” (Tsui, 2015, p. 19) and explains the fact that “scientists have been forced to downgrade their primary objective of making discoveries, to publish as many papers as possible” (Lawrence, 2008, p. 9). According to Frey (2010) “the incentives to publish are not aligned with the creation of valuable new knowledge” and, consequently, the importance of a scientific idea ends up being determined by rankings (Frey, 2010).

The second consequence derives from the prioritization of empirical articles over those with theoretical content: theoretical reflection is discouraged and discussion of ideas is limited, because it is easier and quicker for authors to have articles based on empirical research accepted. And since the scarce production of theoretical articles means fewer authors working on theory, there are fewer and fewer reviewers qualified to evaluate this type of article, which feeds back into the journals’ prioritisation of empirical articles. This situation has a negative impact on theoretical development, this is particularly serious in disciplines that need to make progress in this area, as is the case in the social sciences. The third consequence is the “mimicry of the methodological approaches of the social sciences with those in the hard sciences” (Di Maggio, 2016, p. 5). For the case of political science, Di Maggio (2016) denounces the fact that many political scientists are obsessed with the use of sophisticated statistical tools and care little about the substantive value of the results of their articles. This affects the relevance of research, because the results of many of these papers are completely trivial. The preference for English generates the fourth consequence: authors who are fluent in English are more likely to publish in the best-indexed journals. This strongly disadvantages academics from Latin American academics and, therefore, the dissemination of knowledge produced in this region.

The fifth consequence is the existence of a growing gap between research and the application of knowledge. Thus, for example, in the field of management, this gap can be explained “because the main motivation of academics has shifted from the production of business-useful knowledge

to obtaining the approval of journal editors and reviewers of journals" (Tsui, 2015, p. 19). For his part, Di Maggio (2016, p. 4) argues that "social science doctoral students are rarely socialized by their thesis supervisors or their tutors in understanding the importance of producing research that is useful in the real world". Added to this, is the fact that some editors discard articles that study problems related to a particular region or sector, because they receive fewer citations than those that study the same problem at a more general level. Thus, case studies, which are often more useful from a practical point of view than many statistical researches, are little published.

Latin American academic journals are no strangers to these problems. Although they are generally open source and do not charge authors, the dynamics of indexing put them under strong pressure to adopt the practices described above, which have such a negative impact on the production of knowledge in our universities. Social Responsibility is a management philosophy that emphasizes reducing the negative impacts of an organization's activities on the environment, negative impacts of organizations' activities on their stakeholders and society. In the case of academic organizations (universities and academic journals), the adoption of such a philosophy is a moral imperative, because they are in charge of producing and disseminating a common good. Consequently, although they cannot (and should not) self-marginalize themselves from the indexing system, our academic journals do have a moral obligation to try to reduce its negative consequences.

To reduce the problem of homogenization of research, our journals (i.e. our editors) should encourage methodological diversity and the development of new ideas by encouraging and guiding reviewers to: priorities content over methodological and formal aspects, act with methodological pluralism, and give more importance to the quality and relevance of the literature than to its timeliness. In this way, they will also contribute to reducing the methodological mimicry with the "hard" sciences (third consequence) denounced by Di Maggio (2016), which is critical for the production of relevant knowledge in the social sciences. To avoid the second consequence described above, our journals should encourage authors to write articles of theoretical reflection, which not only implies selecting more articles of this type, but also appointing reviewers with the appropriate qualifications to evaluate them properly.

The problem of the hegemony of English is not only detrimental to our academics. It also affects Latin American journals, because an important part of the best articles escapes to North American or European journals which, being published in English, ensure a greater number of citations. To tackle this problem, some Latin American journals are including articles in English, which limits good researchers who are not fluent in English. In my opinion, the solution lies in what some journals are already doing: publishing articles in Spanish and English. For our region, the fifth consequence is serious: the gap between research and application. To minimize this

consequence, our journals should encourage the publication of articles whose results have an impact in the real world, and which contribute to solving the problems of our region and to its sustainable development. Experience and case studies should have more space in them.

Consequently, our academic journals face the great challenge of surviving in the global indexing system, trying to avoid the negative impacts of this system on the common good that is the knowledge produced in our universities. This is a moral challenge that puts their social responsibility to the test.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest with any institution or trade association of any kind. of any kind.

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