New Hegemonic Tendencies in the Construction of Knowledge
Research Quality Evaluation and Centralization

Thomas Reuter
U Melbourne

The Australian Research Council began to establish a system for ranking all academic journals in terms of their quality in 2007. Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) became fully operational in 2010 and reflects the neoliberal agenda of subjecting all aspects of academic life to an audit culture and thus to monitor, manipulate and commercially exploit those activities. The government now wants to control the very principles by which value or quality is constructed in academic life. This constitutes a further colonization of the academic lifeworld by the system, in the spirit of instrumentalized rationality, to use the terminology coined by Horkheimer and Adorno. Whoever can control the construction of value within a community has the power to define and control the community itself.

The ERA was imposed by an exercise of state power that rests on universities’ dependency on federal funding. There was little room for argument. A consultation was conducted, but the scope provided for criticizing the scheme was limited to the details of ranking particular journals. The measure of quality is “impact on the field”, based on the size of a journal’s readership and the number of citations. At first sight, this may seem reasonable. But innovative or critical thinkers often rely on journals outside the mainstream for publication. Under the ERA, having one’s work published in marginal journals can see the person concerned cut off from research support or even retrenched by their university. This shapes behavior at the coalface of academic life, where decisions are made about promotion, contract extensions and the like.

The journals officially declared to be marginal may be deserted by libraries and individual subscribers and thus come under financial pressure. People with ideas outside of the mainstream of science may well be silenced altogether by the establishment through this ranking and corporatization of journals. Any scheme that seeks to judge and evaluate creative work intrinsically concerned with political, social and cultural criticism, as it is in anthropology, is likely to undervalue work that does not fit in with the status quo. In other words, the danger is that ranking can be used to further marginalize different, alternative voices within a national academic community, or within the shared hegemonic academic sphere at a global level.

What has happened with flagship journals in recent years? In the past they were owned and controlled by professional associations or small editorial teams of academics, but this is no longer true in many cases. The publishing giants, who have bought up journals floundering under their unappreciated volunteer editors, are themselves amalgamating now, into ever larger and more powerful conglomerates. Such global publishing conglomerates were very active in the ERA consultation process. Meanwhile, the Australian Anthropological Society was not consulted at all.

A further danger is that this process will similarly increase the degree of hierarchy in an international academic publishing world that is already full of disparities, between the core and periphery of power and knowledge, and between global and more local languages. Insofar as the new schema of journal evaluation is shaped by the ethnocentrism of globally dominant players, the existence and intrinsic value of culturally diverse value systems, between national anthropologies for example, are ignored and journals in marginal countries devalued, because their ranking is low. Many such journals are not even listed, and such publications are not counted at all. The major publishers also do not promote the dissemination of knowledge originating in non-English speaking, developing countries.

We need to offer well-organized and well-argued resistance to such control schemes if we are to retain the power to construct value within the academic world. One of the best ways to counteract these trends is the open access model of publication. Copyright rules do allow this, but few researchers make use of their rights. As the cost of journal subscription for libraries rises, the question needs to be asked why the public should pay exorbitant prices for research that is already full of disparities. The major publishers also do not promote the dissemination of knowledge originating in non-English speaking, developing countries.

Thomas Reuter is a Future Fellow of the Australian Research Council at the Asia Institute of The University of Melbourne. He is the chair of the World Council of Anthropological Associations, and an executive member of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences.

Setha Low and Gustavo Lins Ribeiro are contributing editors of World Anthropologies, the AN column of the AAA Committee on World Anthropologies.

See the Exhibit at the Smithsonian
National Museum of Natural History I Washington, DC
June 18, 2011 to January 8, 2012
Visit the Exhibit Online
www.mnh.si.edu/exhibits/race
www.understandingrace.org