


On My Way Out – Advice to Young Scholars II: Career Strategy and the Publication Trap

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Written by

Do you ever have the feeling that simply too much is getting published these days? That one simply cannot keep up with it all, that things would be a lot better if less were published, not least because then there would be a greater chance that what we ourselves publish, never too much of that, of course, would get noticed?

Technology has certainly increased academic productivity, as it has increased productivity elsewhere. It is easier to do research (so long as the sources are digitized and searchable), to write, to cite, and to publish. The number of legal journals has exploded, increasingly in online form, driven at least in part by the lower entry barriers, set up and distribution costs for publishers as well as the scandalous profits they make from journal publication. And then, of course, there is self-publishing. In the world of literature, when an author self-publishes it is called vanity publishing; in academia it is called SSRN. I say this tongue in cheek, of course, but grant me it is something of a mixed blessing. Democratization of publishing has increased (good); discernment has diminished (less good).

Not surprisingly, everybody is so busy writing these days, publishing, self-publishing and then self-promoting (attaching links to one's own recent publications at the end of every email has become more the norm than exception) that hardly any time is left for reading. By this I mean serious, reflective reading and not simply picking up a few citations to put in what I happen to be writing, which, if lucky (very lucky), will be read by others in the same cursory manner. But then who cares as long as my piece ends up being similarly cited?

I read. A lot more than I write, and not only because I have aged and have, even in my own eyes, less interesting things to say and certainly less time to do research.

As Editor-in-Chief of two scholarly journals I have to spend an inordinate amount of time reading submissions to *EJIL* and *I•CON*. As you will appreciate, this does not just mean reading everything we publish; we are able to publish only a fraction of what is submitted – but we do read everything. And, as President of the European University Institute for the past two and a half years I statutorily preside over all Chair selection committees. That means a lot more reading. (One redeeming feature of this task is that I'm forced to read regularly in other disciplines.) In fact, excluding weekends in which law is banished and all reading is *Belle Lettres*, sacred texts and a smidgen of theology, I read little else. Admittedly a somewhat skewed, somewhat perverse menu (one does not get to choose what one reads), but in an attempt to make a virtue out of a vice I want to offer some

reflections on the relationship between writing, publishing and career advancement for young scholars – particularly appointments, promotion, and tenure. For, in a chicken and egg fashion, it is not only technology that is driving this development, but also some profound changes in the habits, practices and very culture of the academic profession generally, and legal academia more specifically.

I think few would disagree with me in affirming that the ‘quantitative’ element in the various career Vital Moments has become far more prominent, at times (I fear) even decisive. It is not just that, say, entry-level candidates are expected in many places to have a publication list of considerable volume. In an attempt to quantify and objectify qualitative judgment of such writing, the journals in which one publishes are increasingly ranked or at least assigned to excellence or prestige grids, citations are counted, and various measurements of ‘impact’ (almost all deeply flawed) are used. Bibliometrics and other such ‘indicators’ are playing an increasing role in these evaluative processes.

There is some virtue to this: it does, for example, help counter Old Boy Networking and within its own logic and premises objectifies and assists, thus, in comparing competing candidates. It also produces a variety of negative consequences, some unintended: it has, for example, brought about a domination of English as ‘the’ scholarly language, which in law has far less justification than in, say, the hard sciences or economics. In many, many countries the only publications that count in such evaluative exercises are those that are ‘international’, which means in most cases, English. It discourages esoteric or ‘niche’ research and scholarship which, by their nature, receive less attention and citation. I could go on.

In selection and promotion procedures, though many would deny this, it is also taking its toll. There is far less discussion in various committees of the writing itself; of the quality of the mind behind the writing. What gets discussed *ad nauseam* and *ad tedium* are CVs rather than the content of the intellectual achievements of the scholars. In some deep sense (and perhaps just as many would deride this as sentimental drivel) it risks debasing the very soul of the academic and intellectual endeavour – which often means careful, time-consuming, disinterested (yes) and deep thinking, critical reflection and a delight in the life of the mind.

Not surprisingly, it is also having, understandably, a huge impact on the writing and publication strategies of young scholars in the early stages of their career. It starts already during the doctorate – instead of acquiring the habits (and love) of *la vita contemplativa*, through four to five years of sustained research and reflection about research, critical thinking, writing and rewriting, the pressure is already on, not only to complete a dissertation but to have one’s name on a series of publications. To be admitted to high-quality and prestigious (whatever this might mean in this context) post-doctoral programmes it is not enough to produce a first-class dissertation; one needs also to boast a CV with several ‘publications’ as well as workshops, lectures and all other accoutrements of academia. (A visible measure of the changes in process can be gleaned from the very form and content of CVs that are attached to applications and tenure review.) It is, in my view, not only irrational from a selection point of view – is the

predictive value of such better than the actual content of one's dissertation? – but it has a deleterious impact on the foundation and formation of future scholars and scholarship. And the story then repeats itself during a post-doc or in the early years of an appointment in the race for tenure and beyond. It is trite, but it cannot be altogether wrong, to assert that there is an inevitable relationship between quantity and quality. The idea of taking a couple of years to work on an article (or two) seems so passé.

Are we better off for this? Not from my two vantage points. I see so many journal submissions that show evidence of inquisitive and powerful minds, but are hurried and especially suffer for not having had enough time invested in thinking through their principal propositions and arguments. At *EJIL* and *I•CON* we have had to invent a new category to add to the classical accept, revise and resubmit (with peer review comments guiding the revision) and reject decisions. It is the category of 'potentially very interesting piece but simply unripe at this stage'.

Likewise, I see so many scholars in the appointments process with some outstanding pieces of work but also with tons of noise, often the products of endless conference papers, workshops, edited symposia, the dreaded *Festschriften* and other such publications which, in my view, add little to the substantive appreciation of the candidate and even less to the world of scholarship. It is some consolation that much of it is never read – though the opportunity costs are high.

It is not my intention to hearken back to some Golden Age. I will say, again, that these developments are a mixed blessing. But I do want to offer some common sense and hopefully practical advice in thinking about a publication strategy to young scholars facing the reality of this increased quantification of career development.

My first observation, which may appear romantic, but is not so at all, is that quality is indispensable. If over the course of your career your portfolio does not include a few pieces that are truly remarkable (and there is more than one way to be remarkable) you may still have a good career, but you will never earn the respect which, it is happily still the case, only truly remarkable scholarship earns, and, unless your power of self-deception is more elevated than is usually the case, you risk slowly losing self-respect too.

If you are persuaded by this argument (and try thinking of the scholars in the field whom you truly respect and not just envy their career successes), the strategic challenge – for which there can be more than one solution – becomes clear. How does one manage one's time, one's agenda, so that the quantitative pressures do not compromise the qualitative imperative.

Here are a few suggestions to consider.

Ambition: Over the years I have been consulted so many times by young scholars who have sought my advice on writing projects they had in mind. Very frequently my comment was that the idea was good, the project was interesting and would make for a useful, even good article, but that it lacked ambition. Since, in the new quantitative world, you will

be continually multi-tasking – working simultaneously on various commitments – it is, in my view, indispensable, I will repeat this for emphasis, indispensable, that at any given moment you should be working on one medium to long-term, truly ambitious project. A project that stretches you (and the field) to the limits of your ability. It seems simple. In some ways it is. In reality, it is so easy to glide from one small project to another, racking up the numbers on your publication list, without even noticing.

Master of your own agenda: This is an impossible task. If you have not discovered this yet, you will soon discover one of the greatest paradoxes of academic life. In theory, we do not have a 'Boss'. Academic freedom guarantees that we get to decide what we will research and write about. But in reality an inordinate, stupefying amount of what we write, of what gets written, is determined by the agendas of others: invitations to conferences, to symposia, to research projects, to book chapters, and most insidious of all, by the parameters of grant-giving authorities of various kinds which, explicitly or implicitly have their own agenda. Money is great, but it has the potential greatly to corrupt. Yes, in some sense it is your sovereign decision whether to accept such. The critical question is whether you would have engaged in that task, in that particular paper or contribution had you not received that invitation? The answer is usually a big fat No. This dilemma will accompany you all your life. The realistic position is to ensure that at least some of what you do remains self-generated and that you manage to maintain, like a state in today's interdependent world, a modicum of sovereignty, real not illusory. To the very young scholar this might seem an artificial issue – since they may hanker to receive those invitations as an indicator that they are beginning to make their mark and get noticed. Yes, there is truth to that. And it is a good sign. But mark my words, the trickle will become an avalanche very soon: all those journals about which I spoke before have to fill their pages. How to achieve this balance? Well, in her simplistic way Nancy Reagan gave the answer: Just Say No ... (to some things). Put yourself on a diet. Only so many workshops, conference papers, moderatorships in any one year.

Be discerning – Five is not necessarily better than three. So you cannot stick your head in the sand and remain oblivious to the quantitative pressure, even if, to my mind, two wonderful articles in two years are better than seven merely good or indifferent pieces. But I do not run the show. Yet consider this. A selection committee or tenure committee examines your portfolio. They might send your articles out for external review. (I get such all the time.) The reports come in. One or two got to see the good pieces. Three or four got to see the indifferent ones. Overall judgment? You get it. Here is another way of saying this. The intellectual (and reputational) weight of three pieces with a high specific gravity can and often will be greater than of six with a low specific gravity.

The views expressed here are personal to the Editor-in-Chief and do not reflect the official position of either the European Journal of International Law or the European University Institute.

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