

Communications of the Association for Information Systems

Volume 44

Article 11

2-2019

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Recommended Citation

Samaddar, S., & Chatterjee, S. (2019). A Rejoinder to “Reconsidering Counting Articles in Ranked Venues (CARV) as the Appropriate Evaluation Criteria for the Advancement of Democratic Discourse in the IS Field”. *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, 44, pp-pp. <https://doi.org/10.17705/1CAIS.04411>

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A Rejoinder to “Reconsidering Counting Articles in Ranked Venues (CARV) as the Appropriate Evaluation Criteria for the Advancement of Democratic Discourse in the IS Field”

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Abstract:

We agree with Cuellar et al.'s (2019) main premise that, for a research field to advance, scholars must be able to openly exchange ideas. For such an open exchange to exist, the contexts and methods that evaluate scholarly output must encourage this interchange. Cuellar et al. argue that the current process for evaluating scholarly output (which they call “counting articles in ranked venues” (CARV)) creates pressures that result in a distorted discourse that inhibits the field's growth. In this article, we extend the conversation by adding clarifications, further insights, raising questions, and providing different solutions. Specifically, for the sake of logical clarity of the ensuing debate, we separate individual research contribution (IRC) and field research discourse (FRD). We explain and clarify the pairwise relationships between CARV and IRC and between CARV and FRD in order to discuss the role of CARV or lack thereof in assessing research contribution and discourse. We posit that CARV may assess IRC but not FRD and offer insights into how to improve IRC and FRD. We provide anecdotal evidence that a CARV-free world could exist but that it would entail high agency cost. We also offer an alternative solution that could supplement or substitute CARV. We conclude that any attempt to measure IRC without adequately incorporating attributes of FRD habitat is destined to be flawed.

Keywords: Agency Costs, Individual Research Contribution (IRC), Field Research Discourse (FRD) Scholarly Capital Model (SCM), Stock View.

This manuscript was solicited by the Department Editor for Debates, Karlheinz Kautz.

1 Introduction

In general, we agree with the primary tenet, foundation and arguments that Cuellar, Truex, and Takeda (2019) put forward. In this article, we offer observations regarding the article that we hope to add further insights and potentially offer clarification, completeness, and correctness.

To begin with, we believe that Cuellar et al. (2019), in their title and main article body, unintentionally mislead readers in the sense that they frame the debate and focus on the appropriateness of CARV as the “evaluation criteria for the *advancement of democratic discourse in the field*” (p. 188, emphasis added). Evaluators never use CARV for this purpose. Instead, they use it—arguably wrongly—to assess an individual researcher’s contribution (IRC) to the advancement of that researcher’s field. Simply put, these two treatments of CARV have a different unit of analysis. CARV assesses IRC. According to Cuellar et al., CARV assesses the discourse of a whole field, which we believe incorrectly frames it.

Framed as the later, one could wrongly assign, as Cuellar et al. (2019) implicitly and explicitly do in building their arguments, a misplaced but heightened emphasis and importance on the completeness of the following logical chain for advancing field research discourse (FRD):

$$CARV \rightarrow IRC \rightarrow FRD,$$

where the “→” represents “assess”. Cuellar et al. also use “→” to mean influence and, thus, sometimes confuse the issues at hand. For instance, CARV may or may not “assess” and, thus, arguably, “influence” individual’s work, but the former surely does not and is not meant to “assess” a field’s advancement. An individual’s work does influence and contribute to the field’s development but surely is not meant to assess it (except for articles that review a field and take a “stock” view of it). It is a rather slippery slope to start using “assess” and “influence” interchangeably in the above logical chain and, thus, mislead the debate.

In this article, we focus our comments on each pairwise relationship between the three items in the above chain. We then discuss other ways to assess research contribution (Weiner et al., 2018)

2 CARV and IRC

2.1 Does CARV Assess IRC?

We believe that CARV does assess IRC but in a limited, misguided, and distorted way as Cuellar et al. (2019) correctly develop and argue. We avoid the details here for brevity. However, we say limited because it does not use any other measure and misguided because it focuses on journal rankings, which themselves can be misleading and not truthful. We agree with Cuellar et al. here.

However, in the context of promotion and tenure (P&T) decisions, we depart from Cuellar et al. (2019) in noting that not only CARV’s limitations but also how P&T and other similar committees use it should matter. We observe that most P&T committees, in the name of “efficiency”, gravitate toward CARV as their only or primary measure because, we believe, committee members neglect their duties. In our experience, one can find such neglect across many committees.

The good news if any is that, to compensate for CARV’s insufficiency as a measure of individual research contribution, most P&T processes that we know about have put in place other “measures” or independent assessment channels. Such measures include thorough assessment letters from field experts, each committee members’ own assessment of the work, numbers of grants received, and so on. The bad news is that these other channels have begun to use CARV in their assessment processes, which unwisely multiplies the influence of CARV and, thus, defies the original goal of receiving independent and separate assessment from these channels. For example, in order to “save” time, some external letter writers use CARV to form their opinions. Grant reviewers and P&T committee members have all fallen to this folly, and, thus, these separate channels have begun to lose their independence from each other and multiply the impact that CARV has in assessing IRC. We need to develop, as Cuellar et al. (2019) suggest, non-CARV measures that also hopefully offer some of the attractive attributes of CARV such as efficiency.

2.2 Does CARV Influence IRC?

In short, we believe that CARV does influence IRC. We agree with the position that Cuellar et al. (2019) take in its entirety. We add, however, that, like everything else, the “influence” does not harm the field; on

the contrary, the leading journals do promote and encourage high-quality work most often than not (for the right or wrong reasons).

3 CARV and FRD

3.1 Does CARV Assess FRD?

We do not believe CARV assesses FRD because it is meant for IRC and not for FRD. Cuellar et al. (2019) seem to suggest that CARV *does* assess FRD.

3.2 Does CARV Influence FRD?

Cuellar et al. (2019) seem to strongly suggest that CARV strongly influences FRD! We agree. Again, we do not want to repeat their well-reasoned arguments here, which we can summarize as that various types of conformities twist and curb creative thinking and exploration of more ideas. They also seem to suggest this influence harms the field. We depart from that position in that some conformity benefits the field since it engenders discipline; when conformed properly, it also regiments and builds rigor and relevance in research processes. We also point out and agree with Cuellar et al. that influence is a multinomial construct and, thus, that it comes from many sources and has many types.

4 Solutions

We argue that a primary difficulty in assessing IRC is that scholars birth, nurture, and grow IRC in a connected world or habitat of FRD. Any attempt to measure IRC without adequately incorporating the attributes of the FRD habitat is destined to be flawed. We argue that using CARV to assess IRC represents no exception. CARV—by design and practice—has reduced scholars' motivation to incorporate FRD attributes into their research agenda.

Consequently, any new and improved method to measure IRC needs to capitalize on FRD attributes. We do not find it surprising that the scholarly capital model (SCM) exploits the idea of multinomial influence, contribution, and representation (Cuellar, Takeda, Vidgen, & Truex, 2016). We discuss another multi-dimensional multi-item measure for the IS field in this section.

4.1 Is it Possible to Have a CARV-free Habitat?

We believe that a CARV-free habitat can exist. Even for P&T contexts, it exists! During the early 2000s, the first author (Samaddar, 2002) conducted a simple email survey of the chairpersons of the operations management departments (some combined with IS as ISOM or OMIS and so on) across several universities across the US. The survey requested a copy of their journal list and any comments they might have on how they used it. A very small minority of the respondents (from high-end research schools) said something like:

We do not have a journal list. We do not want one. Each tenured faculty reads all of our colleagues' research articles, and we are constantly immersed in the works of our colleagues in the department, and we assess the work on our own. Our P&T letters do not use any reference to journal rankings.

This quote illustrates a CARV-free P&T world. While it may be ideal, it surely takes a lot of agency, truthfulness, transparency, and "costs" to maintain. Of course, purely subjectively: a CARV-free world may be the best for P&T.

The devil may reside in the attempt to create a measure (preferably efficient) for this purpose. Intimately reading what research your colleagues are doing and their contributions—in our opinion—may go a long way to build a cohesive department much beyond singular P&T decision. Educational institutions need to meet other organizational conditions for CARV-free world to thrive as well.

4.2 If We Must Have a Measure, it Must Complement or Significantly Supplement CARV

As we note above, measures that complement or significantly supplement CARV must exploit the attributes of the FRD habitat. The scholarly capital model (SCM) represents one example. We discuss

another multi-dimensional multi-item measure for the IS field which builds on the belief that, to influence and impact FRD, scholars require a passion to solve real-world problems. It builds on an anecdotal belief that there are IS scholars who do important work that can or do have an impact at the FRD-habitat level. However, it seems that a disconnect between appreciating their work and including them in so-called “basket journals” (which have become the de facto indicator of IS research quality) exists.

As we discuss above and as Cuellar et al. (2019) espouse, to measure influence properly, we must take a multi-dimensional view, and a article or research project must meet more than one of these dimensions to make a great impact. Many times, we can better understand impact from a body of work rather than a singular publication. Table 1 shows the influence metric that results.

Table 1. Multi-dimensional Measure of IS Research Influence (Weiner et al., 2018)

Academic metrics	
Number of citations	1 (1-100), 2 (100-1000), 3 (1000+)
Number of Years since publication	
Perceived quality of the journal/conference	1 (low), 2 (medium), 3 (high)
External grants funding the research	NSF or NIH or DARPA or EU (or other private)
Other fields using the idea in the research	Yes (1), no (0)
Industry/practice metrics	
Patents issued or filed	Yes (1), no (0)
Actual intervention in field or site (action or design research)	Yes (1), no (0)
Commercialization of idea into product/service	Yes (1), no (0)
Startups created based on the idea	Yes (1), no (0)
Society metrics (qualitative or subjective data)	
Benefit of research to scientific community	1 (low), 2 (medium), 3 (high)
Benefit of research to society at large	1 (low), 2 (medium), 3 (high)
Media coverage (radio, TV, print, movie)	Yes (1), no (0)
100-word explanation of why this article is worthy of consideration.	

An effective approach to making an impact has two important ingredients: 1) one must follow one’s heart or passion and 2) one must address a big societal problem. The first ingredient concerns about what excites you? Young IS scholars generally observe: “I am doing this because someone told me to do so” or even make sad statements such as “this methodology will get me into a basket journal”. Research does not constitute only “one” article, and that defies any counting-based paradigm such as CARV. Rather, research represents a stream that will result in articles, books, patents, or even startups and produce a collective contribution to the FRD and society. One has to be immersed in the habitat of one’s choosing for several years to make an impact.

Many fields, including IS, religiously fetishize theory. A good theory-based work is great, but that should not become the only way to make an impact. For instance, we need to first tackle important big problems with solutions and artifacts that can demonstrate utility and efficacy. When we deal with wicked problems, we need to gain traction. Theory will eventually emerge. But to put a lot of stress on designing and solving a problem and also coming up with theory is counterproductive.

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