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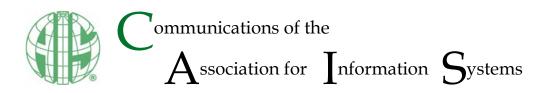# Journal Lists are Not Going Away: A Response to Fitzgerald et al.

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Journal Lists are Not Going Away: A Response to Fitzgerald et al.

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1   Introduction

In their paper, Fitzgerald, Dennis, An, Tsutsui, and Muchhala (2019) make several key points. Primarily, they argue that the practice of estimating a journal paper's quality by considering the journal that published it is flawed. The perceived quality of the journal in which a paper appears does not guarantee the paper's quality. In fact, they argue, journal impact factors themselves constitute flawed measures. The Association for Information Systems (AIS) Senior Scholars' "basket of eight", they claim, like many other journal lists, does not reliably indicate the premier journals in the field. They begin their commentary by stating that "the fact that someone cited a paper almost always clearly and unmistakably signifies that they found it useful in their own research" (p. 111), yet they consider citation counts a lagging indicator of quality. Instead, they propose that the information systems (IS) discipline consider and develop "leading indicators" of journal quality.

Fitzgerald et al. (2019) then demonstrate the weakness of the AIS Senior Scholars' basket of eight list by testing it in multiple ways. They include three additional journals in their tests that researchers have often argued as worthy for inclusion in the basket and six other IS journals that they randomly selected from the Web of Science. None of the tests they conducted replicated the contents of the basket of eight. Only *MIS Quarterly* and *Information Systems Research* consistently appeared among the top eight journals across all measures. They then compared their set of journals using median-based citation measures and PageRank, both of which they consider to be more valid that traditional mean-based measures. While the results of the median-based measures still favored *MISQ* and *ISR*, PageRank proved kinder to the basket of eight. They then introduced alternative measures (altmetrics) based at the paper- rather than the journal-level and argued that the discipline needs to seriously consider developing and using such measures.

Fitzgerald et al. (2019) end with this conclusion: "we should no longer consider the journal as a reliable proxy for paper quality in promotion and tenure assessments" (p. 128). (They then go on to cite both Frost and Machiavelli in their paper's coda—an unexpected but interesting pairing.)

Fitzgerald et al.'s (2019) paper is an important one for the discipline and for individual scholars. They make persuasive arguments. By and large, though, their paper raises the question about why journal lists—at the departmental, college, professional association, and national levels—exist in the first place. While IS department chairs may have always had lists of journals they believed represented worthy places for their faculty to publish in mind, they have not always written such lists down. Now, though, IS departments commonly have formalized, written journal lists. Job candidates ask about these lists during campus visits, the IS departments provide the lists to new hires as soon as they sign their contracts, departmental and college promotion and tenure (P&T) committees rely on them; and deans review and approve them. While researchers have some wiggle room to justify why they published in a journal not on the list, the list remains the paramount guideline for where IS faculty should publish.

The lists are important due to the many other ways that members of the IS community use them, such as to make P&T decisions, to help determine pay increases, and to evaluate the quality of both individual faculty members and their departments (and, thus, their colleges). Consider, for example, the AIS Research Rankings Service, which deans can use to easily determine how well their IS departments have performed compared to others in the number of publications that faculty members have published in the basket of eight (or some subset thereof).

Several factors influenced business schools to formalize journal lists. As governmental support for public higher education decreased and higher education institutions spread more costs to individuals (especially students and their parents), the public discovered the high cost of higher education. They began to question whether its benefits to society matched its costs. Taxpayers began to demand accountability from public higher education for their tax dollar investments. In some places, such as the UK (Salter, Salandra, & Walker 2017), the formula for funding university research now includes estimations of the quality of faculty publication records. The AACSB, in its focus on measuring the impact of business school research, includes journal quality as one viable metric (AACSB International, 2012). And the ready availability of data about journals and the papers they publish, via the Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Scopus made it easier to count citations and readily measure journal impact.

How does a journal make it onto a list? Certainly the journal impact factors that Fitzgerald et al. (2019) consider help a journal make a list. But other more clearly subjective factors play a part as well, such as the journal's reputation, its perceived acceptance rate, the perceived effort required to publish a paper in it (e.g., the number of rounds of review required), the perceived quality of the reviews and the guidance that editors

provide to authors, the editorial board's membership, the editor-in-chief's reputation, how the discipline's leadership views the journal's quality, and whether a professional association or a commercial publisher owns the journal.

Further, such factors do not even include political considerations. Anyone who has had the task to help create a departmental journal list knows how political the exercise can be. Deans, department chairs, established scholars, and other stakeholders all have strong opinions about what journals a list should and should not include. The argument never concerns the journals that such individuals agree on as premier journals: the real fight concerns the journals at the edge, the journals that some see as good and others see as questionable. Further, IS research's diverse nature adds another level of complexity. Stakeholders may readily identify established journals as suitable for publishing behavioral or economics-based research, but what about analytics? What about design science? My departmental list includes preferred journals for publishing behavioral, technical, and analytics research, but not every IS department willingly devises such a solution—some prefer to keep their lists short and limited.

Given the reasons that the various relevant stakeholders add journals to a list and given the many purposes that journal lists serve, I find it difficult to see a time when the research community will no longer see the journal that publishes a paper "as a reliable measure of article quality". On the positive side, at least for promotion and tenure decisions, I note that these decisions do not solely depend on a paper's publication venue. Individual-level metrics, such as the h-index and the total number of citations to an author's work, also serve as important parts of the deliberations along with assessments about teaching and service and external evaluations.

That being said, I do agree with Fitzgerald et al. (2019) that we need new measures. They provide a good set to consider. All of the metrics we rely on now were new once and became more widespread as they became easier to calculate. The h-index, which Hirsch (2005) first suggested, represents a good example. It saw limited use at first, but its popularity and utility grew along with the availability and reach of Google Scholar and Web of Science data. It is inconceivable now that a promotion and tenure packet or an external evaluation would not include a reference to the candidate's h-index. Some of the metrics that Fitzgerald et al. (2019) suggest may follow the same trajectory.

For the reasons I present in this paper, I believe that journal lists—at the department, college, association, or national level—will not go away any time soon. In many cases, the academic business community has expended so much effort in creating, approving, and maintaining the lists that it cannot abandon them. For example, some national lists, such as the lists that the Association for Business Schools in the UK (ABS, 2015) or the Australian Business Deans Council in Australia (2018) have created, seem to have taken on lives of their own and grown too important to abandon. However, faculty and administrators need to understand the limitations of the lists and the metrics used to determine journal quality. Thus, again, while I agree that we need new measures, even Fitzgerald et al. (2019) admit that our discipline should not "abandon our traditional measures until we better understand the new measures" (p. 129). Let the new understanding commence.

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