
A Skeptical Note on Bibliometrics

A Reply to Hannes Boelsen

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My thanks to Boelsen for his penetrating understanding of my modest contribution to this collection, and for placing its significance in a much broader context, namely, the context of the full range of scientific and philosophical research to which it might be *relevant*. Indeed, his principal topic is the emerging internet mechanism for evaluating the relevance of *any* publication to the research interests of scholars in general, a mechanism that allows a specific scholar to identify, from among the teeming multitude, exactly those published papers most likely to be of interest to him or her. Its brief application to my own paper in this collection is just one illustration of its wide-ranging *possible* applications.

The mechanism he describes – namely, the calculation of “connections strengths” between the prototype topics and the key words found in the abstracts of any arbitrarily chosen pair of publications – is an interesting elaboration of the simpler “key words” convention already in widespread use in modern journals, a convention that has already proven to be very useful to scholars all across the academic spectrum, as we all know. Taking the variable “connection strengths” – as defined by Boelsen – between those already-salient indexes into account, and making them systematically available also, would seem only to enhance the usefulness of the mechanisms already in play.

And no doubt it would. However, and its undoubted advantages conceded, there is an unfortunate limit on the usefulness of such a mechanism, a limit already familiar to us from our experience with the existing conventions of abstracts and key words. They are intellectually useful only if, and only to the extent that, one *already understands* the “key words” involved, and the research areas that they name. Otherwise, the mechanism here at issue does no more than *cluster together* distinct publications as having “the same”, or “closely similar”, intellectual concerns. That is, it does provide a map of the “topical concentrations” at the presumptive current “ceiling” of academic understanding, but it does not itself raise the “level” of that ceiling. By itself, it provides no novel or additional understanding of the various topics themselves displayed in its many lists. *That* sort of achievement, if it is realized at all, must be made by those occasional thinkers who actually *read* the papers thus clustered together, and subsequently manage to *solve* one or more of the problems that they still leave open, by using the quite different mechanisms that reside within the human *brain*.

In sum, the mechanism described by Boelsen will certainly help aspiring scholars to *catch up* on the already existing research that is relevant to their own research interests, and may thereby stimulate further research. But any intellectual or theoretical novelties will have to come from the subsequent researches of those aspiring scholars themselves, and not from the mechanism described by Boelsen. That said, in constructing “key-word lists” for my own papers in the future, I will keep the mechanism described by Boelsen firmly in mind. And for a reason that would not have occurred to me, save for Boelsen’s commentary. In constructing the abstract and key-words list for my own paper in this collection, I did not pay special attention to the possible *novel uses* to which its contents might be put, and the possible *novel topics* for which it might provide enlightenment. To illustrate this point, I would now include the key words *moral pathology*, *moral character*, *moral reasoning*, *moral development*, and *moral conflict* in such a list. For this belated oppor-

tunity, here on this page, I am once again in Boelsen’s debt.