

Journal-Ranking Lists, Ideology, and the Academic Librarian: A Critical Analysis

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1. Introduction

Academic library faculties sometimes use ranked lists of journals as quantitative tools for promotion & tenure (P&T) decisions. This work in progress study uses a Marxist critical analysis to argue that such ranking lists (1) are quantitatively forced into the position of library school teaching faculty, and (2) that this shoehorning of the academic librarian into an evaluation structure suited for teaching faculty reveals the alienation of academics in general.

2. Ranking Lists and Academic Librarians

Bales, Sare, Coker, and VanDuinkerken (2011) performed a case study of a journal-ranking list proposed by Texas A&M University (TAMU) libraries for P&T decisions. The researchers collected and examined the peer-reviewed single-authored articles published in these eight journals from 2004-2008, categorizing the articles as either practical or theoretical. The findings indicated that, while journals in the ranking list contain a significant number of practical "practice-based" research articles, they also contain a large percentage of theoretical research articles. Except for two journals, *Portal* and the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, single-authored theoretical research articles are overwhelmingly written by those academics with PhD's (see table below).

	% of total theory papers authored by MLS only	% of total practical papers authored by MLS only
Journal of the American Society of Information Science and Technology	.048	.026
Journal of Documentation	.110	.027
Library and Information Science Research	.156	.000
Information Processing and Management	.023	NA
Library Quarterly	.109	.063
College and Research Libraries	.429	.700
Portal	.538	.683
Journal of Academic Librarianship	.565	.765

Table: Percentages of Total Single Authored Theory or Practical Papers Authored by MLS Only.

This suggests that, while theoretical articles are preferable to practical articles (a notion also supported by the inclusion of JASIST, JDOC, and IP&M on the list), they are being produced largely in library schools and not libraries. These findings, that academic librarians tend to publish practical research articles is supported in the literature (Watson-Boone, 2000; Koufogiannakis, Slater, and Crumley, 2004; Schlögl and Stock, 2008). The TAMU ranking list, therefore, appears better suited for evaluating those teaching on library school faculties.

3. Ranking Lists and Ideology

We contend that, as a result of the quantification and reductionism of such ranking lists, academic librarians are awkwardly transformed into what we term the *beau ideal* of the teaching faculty, being forced to fit a technical/quantitative model better suited for “traditional” teacher/researchers—as opposed to becoming “organic intellectuals” (Gramsci, 1978).

This conclusion, however, points to a larger exploitation of tenure track academics. In the case of ranking lists, academics are made to adhere to a schema that renders “prestige” equivalent to economic value. The accumulation of prestige allows the academic to maintain their livelihood within the prevailing ideological system and advance through the ranks of the petty bourgeoisie as traditional intellectuals. In turn, this prestige adds to the capital of the

institution itself. Through this process, the ranking list forces the intellectual laborer into the role of the “maximized worker,” i.e., the list represents the model to which the worker must conform to in order for the institution to insure a baseline margin of profitability. The *beau ideal* of the teaching faculty, therefore, reveals itself as a skein for worker exploitation, becoming synonymous with the *maximized intellectual worker*. The ranking list is a competitive quota that determines both the institutional value of the research document and to some extent, as outlined below, the document’s intellectual and ideological content.

The academic librarian, as a result, is alienated from their labor by a sort of double movement. First they are made to assume the role of a different sort of intellectual. Ranking lists illustrate the absurd transformation of librarians into teaching faculty for what is arguably an educational institution’s aggrandizement of profit. Second, the conflation of the *in abstracto* academic with a profit tool, i.e., her conversion into a list, implicitly (or in some cases explicitly) makes the research results subservient to the profit motive. The stifling limits of the list alienates the intellectual worker from her labor, which she creates for someone or something else (e.g., the administration, the institution, the necessity of maintaining her own livelihood) as opposed to creating it for her constituency, the library users. If the researcher is required to publish her work in a limited number of outlets, her work must conform to, and to some degree be shaped and limited by, the concerns of those outlets.

4. Conclusion

The capitalist ideological underpinnings of journal-ranking lists run counter to the normative motivations of *all* of the sciences (no matter how implicit these motivations may be within certain fields). We suggest, however, that while the exposed ideology of ranking lists runs counter to the *professed* motivations of science, it functions correctly as a means through which

capitalist society successfully reproduces labor power and perpetuates the *status quo* (Althusser, 2001).

We, however, suggest the exploration of counter-hegemonic alternatives to ranking lists: efforts that elevate the production of knowledge above the production of capital. This places into question the viability of the university as a capitalist institution, but only the cynical would argue that the production of knowledge is intrinsically and forever bound to the production of capital.

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