Journal Rankings: Does One Size Fit All?

Commentary on the Mort et al. Paper

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Michael J. Polonsky

The question of ranking journals, institutions, individual academics and specific papers is regularly visited within business and management disciplines. The Mort, et al. (2004) study advances the discussion by examining this theme within the context of academic marketing in Australia and New Zealand. In this commentary I comment on three aspects of the study that are left partially unanswered: why rank journals in the first place, how should journals be evaluated, and to what extent are the aspirations of academics in the region met?

1. Why Rank Journals?
In describing the perceptions of senior marketing academics from Australian and New Zealand institutions, Mort et al. identify the most highly regarded journals in the eyes of those most directly responsible for recruiting, developing and evaluating marketers within the educational system. This is similar to setting out an assessment scheme for students in order to determine who ought to receive an “A” grade, a “B” grade, and so forth. Publication in the Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research or Journal of Consumer Research, results in an “A” grade, taking the academic to the top of the class so to speak.

This is an important exercise, especially for research-oriented institutions where there is a need for transparent assessment schemes. However, while this appears to be beneficial, it is unclear whether this use of journal rankings should be the same across all institutions, especially if there is a difference in the educational focus of institutions. Some commentators have argued quite strongly that educational focus should impact on the construction and use of rankings (Hawes and Keiller 2002). For instance, in a teaching-oriented institution publication in the Journal of Marketing Education might carry more weight than otherwise, as might authorship of textbooks and case material.

Different institutional perspectives of a journal’s “worth” may be important from a workload management perspective as well. For example, some of my research in the area of academic workplace satisfaction and productivity suggests that, in the US, many individuals based at teaching-oriented institutions are, in fact, happier and less stressed because the pressure to publish is not as strong as at research-oriented institutions (Polonsky et al. 2003). Interestingly, these individuals’ relative publishing records are not necessarily any lower that others, which might suggest the journals that they target are possibly different. [It also should be noted, however, that salaries at teaching-oriented institutions tend to be lower (DocSig 2004). Moreover, if individuals at these institutions aspire to work at places that value work published in prestige journals, then they need to be able to produce at these levels as well.]

2. How Should Journals Be Evaluated?
The general question of how to evaluate research or journals is not easily addressed. Mort et al. point out that, potentially, various measures are applicable: journal citation indexes, perceptual rankings, and accessibility. All these measures can, and have, been used. They do not necessarily give equivalent results: for instance, the Sloan Management Review, the Journal of Marketing Research and the Journal of Advertising Research topped the Journal of Marketing and the Journal of Consumer Research in a ranking based on accessibility (Polonsky et al. 1999). In the years since that research was undertaken some journals have invested heavily in making themselves more accessible (the Journal of Consumer Research is a case in point).

The authors of the current study correctly identify that there may be variations in rankings resulting from a range of moderating factors, such as: the focus of the institution, the type of programs taught, the background
from which academics come, and regional variations. Indeed, the rationale for Mort et al.’s study is partially that the views of senior academics in Australia and New Zealand may differ from others around the globe. But the question as to why should there be regional differences in how journals are perceived is not really addressed in the paper, although it has been the topic of other research (Theorharakis and Hirst 2002). In a recent ANZMAC paper Polonsky and Whitelaw (2003) found there were regional differences in the perceived relative importance of criteria that could be used to evaluate journals. As such, there may be regional differences in rankings based on specific evaluative criteria, but no differences in overall evaluations of journal quality (e.g., the extent to which a journal publishes relevant and usable research might be weighed differently by different academic communities).

Another response to the question of how to rank journals is to focus on the published papers themselves – to assess the quality of the work published. This is deceptively simple. But, through who’s eyes should this be seen? While assessments of research quality by “senior academics” may be highly relevant for those working at academic institutions, would the practical significance of published papers be better measured by CEOs or Chief Marketing Officers in the “top” firms? Moreover, even senior academics, reviewers and editors sometimes have difficulty assessing the quality of published work. The true value and significance of a published work may only be recognised years after it first appeared. It is because of the need for an elapse of time that Nobel prizes are often given to individuals for work completed years previously – in some cases the work had limited impact on the state of knowledge at the time of publication, in other instances time was needed to establish the validity of the work.

A related issue is whether individuals are targeting the most appropriate outlets for their work. In the push to increase research outputs (which is different to inputs such as grants), individuals may be too focused on “runs on the board”, rather than ensuring that their work generates knowledge.

3. To What Extent Are Aspirations Met?
The results of the Mort et al. ranking are not surprising if we see the perceptual rankings as based on the underlying aspiration of senior academics in the region to emulate those at leading North American institutions. Academia and academic knowledge are after all international in character, if not truly global.

The question then arises of whether these aspirations are met. Evidence from some non-North American countries is not encouraging. For instance, in the UK in 2002 none of the UK academics surveyed targeted the “big” US journals with research submissions (Easton and Easton 2003). It isn’t known how many academics in the Australasia region are targeting works at these “big” journals; however, the number of published papers in these journals from authors in the region suggests academics are striving to target top-tier journals. Moreover, a study by Cheng et al. (2003) demonstrated that the top 20 Asia-Pacific universities (including Australasian institutions) hold their own against North American ones in terms of research productivity in top-tier journals.

One would hope that all academics seek to produce the highest quality work and thus, over time, that they would seek to improve their performance in regards to targeted outlets – based on their own individual and institutional criteria. Examining the progression or advancement of work over a person’s career is not something that can be undertaken easily, whatever the ranking criteria, but it would be a different, and potentially instructive, way to look at the themes addressed here.

4. Conclusions
The Mort et al. paper allows individuals in Australia and New Zealand to have some idea of the perceptual rankings of journals by senior academics. As such, it communicates valuable information to those who might be evaluated by these senior academics. The question of whether this is how the research performance of all staff, across institutions and across levels within institutions, should be measured is something that needs to be considered in the future. Arguably, one size does not fit all.

References
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Biography

Michael Polonsky, PhD, is Melbourne Airport Chair in Marketing at Victoria University, Melbourne. For over a decade he has been observing and writing about marketing journals and the outputs of Asia-Pacific marketing academics.

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