

From: Don Aitkin at home <danbee@netspeed.com.au>  
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To: danbee@netspeed.com.au  
Subject: What is Knowledge?

What is Knowledge?

Some recent discussions on the Research Quality Framework have pushed me to wrestle again with what that funny stuff we call 'knowledge'. For those in universities, knowledge is what they teach, and undertake research in - or, more accurately, knowledge is the result of their research.

Universities aren't the only sources of knowledge, of course, but they have a crucial role in legitimising it, through academics writing it down and arguing about it - 'distilling' it, as we like to say. There is an awful lot of knowledge about. Well before the end of the 20th century those active in the 'knowledge' domain were claiming that human knowledge had increased more than fifty-fold since the end of the second world war.

What the increase is now, heaven knows. The last figure I saw for the total number of academic journals published in the world exceeded 500,000. And these journals are, at least to a large degree, the basis for the RQF. Research 'quality' is measured not only by how much you publish, but by where you publish it, and at least conceptually, by how many people read it. I've read somewhere that the average number of citations for all journal articles is a little over 1, and the assumption is that the author will always cite his own work at least once!

As a historian and political scientist who liked to write books, and valued a good book at twenty or so articles, I thought that any citation system based on journals alone was empty of meaning. My scientific friends take the opposite view. For them a book is written late in one's career, any may bring together one's earlier work, which will already have received its due attention in the journals.

Another matter for fundamental disagreement is the generality of knowledge. Physics is physics, and can be done anywhere, by anyone. It is always the same physics. But history is not like physics. Chinese history differs according to who is writing it. As the Chinese are currently saying, indignantly, Japanese textbooks are not telling the truth about what happened in China in the 1930s and 1940s.

In our own country there are continuing debates about what really happened in the last 219 years, and it really does matter where you start, what you regard as evidence, and so on. Not only that, there is considerable indifference around the world about what happened in other people's histories. There is, for example, not much interest in Australia about Venezuelan history, and we are not caught up in Venezuelan debates about the meaning of their past, any more than they are with ours.

That has an effect on the journals and books. The current dogma is that one should publish in international journals because they have the largest capacity to influence 'knowledge' and, by extension, one's status in the world of knowledge. This is a peculiarly Australian reading of the world of knowledge. Americans, for example, tend to publish in American journals.

In physics there are long-established journals that, whether British or American (or German or Russian) are the places to get your work published. It is hard to get into them. and if you do, that is a feather in your cap. They have 'impact'.

In history, however, the same rule does not apply. The best places to read American historical debates about what constitutes historical knowledge about the USA are American journals. The best places to read about what constitutes historical knowledge about Australia are Australian journals.

Alas, the American journals have higher 'impact', simply because their reach is much greater. After all, the USA contains over 300 million people, Australia, not quite 21 million. And more people in other countries learn about American history than about Australian history. We can't compete in numbers, even if our best work is as good as their best work (and I believe it is).

The Australian academic world has been wrestling with this problem for at least the last twenty years. DEST's top quality category, for researchers, will accept people if what they do is of great importance to Australia - so long as the work is of equivalent quality to the best in a general field, like physics. I don't think that's unreasonable.

