

THE ASSESSMENT OF ORIGINALITY IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH¹

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SUMMARY. Nowadays, for those working in the academic field, the list of publications has become an essential condition in justifying the research activity. “To be or not to be” published in high-ranking journals and indexed in databases is a criterion in the evaluation of any researcher. In some cases, originality is a *sine qua non* condition for acceptance or publication. And yet sometimes the definition of the concept of “originality” is confusing in some cases. The novice researcher (and not only) needs some terminological clarifications and contextualization in the daily practice. In this sense, this paper offers possible answers to the questions: what is considered to be research? what is originality in research and why is it important? who and how evaluates originality in research? This last interrogation is the key question of the article, and the answer is presented on two main coordinates: the pre-publication evaluation (performed by the author himself followed by the peer-reviewer) and the post-publication evaluation (performed by Altmetrics and again by the author). Therefore, the whole process of evaluation is viewed from the perspective of a cycle that begins and ends with the author.

Keywords: research, originality, peer-review, databases, Altmetrics, databases, citations

Introduction

Academic research and publication it became a reference point for every scholar. The number of publications is an important factor that influence the decisions regarding hiring, acceptance of new positions,

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scholarships, funding distribution, academic awards etc. To get published, a researcher must prove the quality of his outcomes. Most often within the list of criteria for acceptance originality stays at the core of prerequisites. Generally speaking, originality is understood as discovering new knowledge. But in everyday practice, sometimes originality is quite difficult to evaluate or to measure.

This paper has a theoretical approach with the aim to offer guidelines in early researchers who want to pursue an academic career. Starting with terminological clarifications for the terms, “originality”, “research”, the study proceeds with the research question: who and how evaluates originality in academic research? In this regard is present the process of assessment from the perspective of two main stages: pre-publication (self-assessment and peer-review) and post-publication (citations and met-assessment).

What is considered to be research?

The Online Etymology Dictionary³ presents research as having its roots in the French term *recherché* (1530) with the meaning of the “act of searching closely” (1570); in 1630 is allotted the meaning: “diligent scientific inquiry and investigation directed to the discovery of some fact” and 1923 was understood as a “work on a large scale toward innovation”. On the same coordinate, the Cambridge Dictionary defines research as: “a detailed study of a subject, especially in order to discover new information or reach a new understanding”⁴.

As it can be seen, the research starts with a search, a search for finding new information. This is the research before the results of research! It’s like a journey from research as a process to research as outcomes.

The present paper focuses on the research as outcome. And the results of research can be materialized in different ways: Theses (Bachelor thesis; Master thesis; Doctoral thesis; Postdoctoral thesis Habilitation thesis); Articles (Journal article; Article and / or Entry in Encyclopedia, Dictionary⁵); Conference presentation (seen as a contribution to research given in an oral discourse); Chapter (in a collective book written by the contribution of different

³ “research” in Harper, Douglas. *Online Etymology Dictionary* 2001-2022 at www.etymonline.com/search?q=research

⁴ “research” in Cambridge Dictionary at dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/research

⁵ Relevant research examples in this regard are: *Grove Music Online* (<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic>); *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* <https://www.mgg-online.com/> which publishes in-depths articles on very diverse spectrum of musical issues.

authors); Book (Monograph, Textbook, Handbook, Manual, Guide, Critical edition); Research proposals (which can be written for different purposes as: PhD thesis, Book publishing, Funding project) etc.

The main idea is that research must lead to new discoveries, and another relevant term “research” is given by the Nobel Prize Winner Albert Szent-Györgyi (1893-1986): “Research is to see what everybody else has seen, and to think what nobody else has thought.”⁶

What is originality in research and why is it important?

Originality stays at the center point into the academic work and it's considered the main ingredient for a researcher. Sometimes, being under the pressure of the *publish or perish* aphorism the originality becomes a challenge issue. In other situations, it is getting more important especially for those who want to be hired, to be accepted in new job positions, or to be accepted for scholarships, for research funding, for academic awards and so on. For a doctoral thesis, by example, originality is a *sine qua non* condition in being awarded with the title of Doctor. Almost every researcher, at least once, have personally asked: what is originality? And how can I be original?

Being understood in general as discovering new knowledge, in practice, originality is quite difficult to evaluate and sometimes to measure because it is not an unanimously definition. According to Lynn Dirk, there is “no precise definition of scientific originality”⁷ and due to this sometimes there is space for subjectivity both from the authors and or / evaluators.

The chronological thread goes back to the French term *originalité* (1690) as it is presented in Online Etymology Dictionary which defines it as “the quality of being novel, freshness of style or character” (1787)⁸. Often the term “originality” is often encountered with the following synonyms: “novelty”⁹, “innovation”, “creativity”¹⁰, “relevance”¹¹, “uniqueness”, “significant

⁶ De la Rosa, Miguel A. “Thinking up an original scientific research project”. *Turkish Journal of Biochemistry*. 2020, p. 3.

⁷ Dirk, Lynn. “A Measure of Originality: The Elements of Science”. *Social Studies of Science*. vol. 29, no. 5, oct. 1999, pp. 756-777.

⁸ “originality” in Harper, Douglas. *Online Etymology Dictionary* 2001-2022 at www.etymonline.com/word/originality#etymonline_v_29888

⁹ Trapido, D. *How novelty in knowledge earns recognition: The role of consistent identities*. Research Policy, 44, 2015, pp. 1488-1500.

¹⁰ Baptista, Ana et al. *The doctorate as an original contribution to knowledge: Considering relationships between originality, creativity, and innovation*, Frontline Learning Research Vol.3 No. 3, Special Issue, 2015, pp. 51-66.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

contribution”¹² “impact”¹³.

“Originality is not only related to an outcome or product, but also to the overall process of producing an outcome. A doctoral student cannot achieve a product without undergoing a process that stimulates the creation of that product. What is deemed original may vary between disciplines, programs, and even individual projects. The originality of a dissertation can be expressed in a few ways, and the kind of originality that is recognized and appreciated has traditionally been dependent on discipline.”¹⁴

In proceeding further into knowledge, on the path of research, Miguel A. De la Rosa recommends the following: “to know where to go, we must think about how to proceed to the next step. We thus need a reference, and the reference is always the past. Once we have a reference point (the past), we have three points (the past, the present and the future), making it easier to draw and move in a straight line.”¹⁵ In other words, for the researcher who wants to offer something new (regarding knowledge), the key element is to know what has already been done in the past. Then the second step is to find the scientific gap which is in the present. And thirdly is the launch into the phase of discovery.

By comparison, originality in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines is defined by “publishability”¹⁶ whilst in arts, humanities, and social sciences it is related to “intellectual originality”. Guetzkow states that “natural sciences define originality “as the production of new findings and new theories”, while social sciences and humanities define it “much more broadly: as using a new approach, theory, method, or data; studying a new topic, doing research in an understudied area; or producing new findings”¹⁷.

¹² Phillips, Estelle M. and Pugh, Derek S. *How to Get a PhD. A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors*, Open University Press, 2005, p. 62.

¹³ Shibayama, Sotaro; Wang, Jian, “Measuring originality in science”. In *Scientometrics* 2020, 122, pp. 409-427. Published online: 11 November 2019.

¹⁴ Baptista, Ana et al., The doctorate as an original contribution to knowledge: Considering relationships between originality, creativity, and innovation, “Frontline Learning Research” Vol.3 No. 3 Special Issue, 2015, 51 – 6, p. 53.

¹⁵ De la Rosa, Miguel A. “Thinking up an original scientific research project”. In *Turkish Journal of Biochemistry*. 2020, 1-5, p. 5.

¹⁶ Clarke, Gerard; Lunt, Ingrid, “The concept of ‘originality’ in the Ph.D.: how is it interpreted by examiners?”. In *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 39(7), 2014, pp. 803-820.

¹⁷ Guetzkow, J.; Lamont, M.; Mallard, G. “What is Originality in the Humanities and the Social Sciences?” In *American Sociological Review*, 69(2), 2004, pp. 190-212. p. 190.

Who and how assess the originality in academic research?

Accordingly, to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the verb “assess” is documented in 1934 with the following connotation: “to judge the value”¹⁸. In this context of evaluating the value I see the assessment of originality as a cycle that starts and ends at the author. According to Ralf Buckley¹⁹ assessment has two main different phases: pre-publication and post-publication but I would include into each phase the following:

- pre-publication assessment
 - self-assessment by the author
 - assessment by peer-reviewer
- post-publication assessment
 - assessment by digital metrics
 - meta-assessment by the author

Self-assessment by the author

This type of continuously evaluation should be made by the author throughout the entire process of writing. To have a good development of the manuscript it is recommended to keep focus on the core interrogation(s) or research question(s) and to conduct the discourse efficiently to reach the target by answering the problem in discussion. The abundance of information may influence the researcher to move slightly from the central line but from time to time a good method to disposal from unnecessary information is a self-assessment regarding the main idea(s) of the paper. An original article is made up by important elements that it should be taken into consideration when preparing the manuscript for submission.

Assessment by peer reviewer

Based on a long tradition of a couple of centuries, the peer reviewing method plays a crucial role by giving the fact that it helps the researchers to validate and to improve the quality of their work. With this aim in mind, a peer reviewer assesses the originality of the manuscript by observing if the work

¹⁸ “assess” in Douglas Harper, *Online Etymology Dictionary*, pp. 2001-2022, www.etymonline.com/search?q=assess

¹⁹ Buckley R. “Originality in Research Publication: Measure, Concept, or Skill?”. In *Journal of Travel Research*. Accessed online first in May 2022.

has, or has not, those elements that bring a contribution to the field. Of course, there are differences according to each field and according to the policies and ethics of each journal but there are some general guidelines applicable to studies in the field of Music. The criteria in the assessment of a peer reviewer may include and are not limited to:

- the synthesis of what is already now in the field
- relevance of the bibliography in the paper
- originality in results or in the approach
- the importance of the theme among other studies in the same area
- logical structure of the paper
- persuasiveness of the discourse
- the relevance of the methods applicable to the research question and type of study.

Assessment by digital metrics

Once a paper has passed through the gates of peer-reviewers and it has been uploaded into scientific databases, someone may think that this was the end of the evaluation. But in fact, another phase just began: the post-publication assessment (which is based on research metrics). These research metrics are tools used to assess the quality and impact of research results. These tools apply to the journal, to the article and to the author himself. Each of these metrics has its own benefits and limitations in assessment therefore it is recommended in assessment not be used only a single metric but to be taken into consideration within the context of other metric tools (peer review, subject citation rates, circulation, source data).

These altmetrics²⁰ may include page views, downloads, blog mentions, social media tags, citations. The last one it is considered the most important in an academic profile. The many numbers of times an article has been cited in other's work the much higher the number of citations is.

The most reputable databases that use altmetrics are considered:

- Web of Science²¹: an abstract and citation database which includes 21,100 peer-reviewed, high-quality scholarly journals published worldwide in over 250 sciences, social sciences, and arts and humanities disciplines. Conference proceedings and book data are also included.

²⁰ Williams, Ann E., "Altmetrics: An Overview and Evaluation". In *Online Information Review* 41 / 3. 2017, pp. 311-317, p. 311.

²¹ www.clarivate.com/webofsciencegroup/solutions/web-of-science/

- European Reference Index for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (ERIH PLUS)²²: is an index containing bibliographic information on academic journals in the humanities and social sciences with the aim to increase to the visibility and to disseminate their work in national and international languages. It provides bibliographic and detailed information for 10.000 journals
- Scopus²³: an abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature: scientific journals, books, and conference proceedings. It indexes over 23,000 peer-reviewed journals, 850 book series and conference papers from 120,000 worldwide events;
- Google Scholar²⁴: which is useful for interdisciplinary and international coverage because it tracks all types of scholarly publications on the internet.

Meta-assessment by the author

When the author evaluates the results of all the assessments that were applied to his / her research work this can be called meta-assessment. The purpose of this evaluation is to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the paper and to observe if it had or had not an impact within the academic network and to notice why had been so. Academic publishing is not a fact accomplished because of the professional duties of an author but because the target is to make a difference and to leave an improvement among other scholars. This meta-assessment helps a researcher to set for himself new purposes, clarifies the path when he starts new research, and has an important role in finding his / her own path toward originality and to establish himself as an original author in a niche field of study. An author publishes so that others may read and be informed in a specific topic. This meta-assessment is to evaluate how other perceived you and helps to be more specific according to the needs of the academic network so that others may benefit from what you offered to the stakeholders.

²² www.kanalregister.hkdir.no/publiseringskanaler/erihplus/

²³ www.scopus.com/

²⁴ scholar.google.com/

Conclusions

The task of research in the academia is a prerequisite that follows a scholar along his career. The challenge appears when the scholar wants to stand up among the others to bring new information either by new methods or addressing new questions, or by inter- and cross-disciplinary approach. According to Columbus: “You can never cross the ocean unless you have the courage to lose sight of the shore. In some way, you must explore new ideas, new fields, and new worlds.”²⁵ This idea is a relevant for those who search for the originality in research! And the originality starts at the origins in seeing what is already done and what can be done in the future. Once the paper has passed the self-assessment of what and how to do, then it is assessed by the outside eye of the peer reviewer and the process continues with the digital tools of assessment.

Regarding the metric assessment unconsciously originality is often associated with the number of citations. Unspoken it is considered that if someone has a high number of citations that means he has done an original work. But let's take into consideration that there cases when citations are made for various reasons and not only for positive examples. Another aspect is that citations metrics are made in a given period of time and usually in the recent years of publication. And what should we do with an article, by example: a valuable article signed by Romeo Ghircoiașiu in 1978 on *Classification of music sciences and some problems of object and method*, published in *Musicology papers*²⁶. It is not original because has not so many citations?!... The main idea is that all these digital metrics are good, but is should be taken into consideration in combination with other methods of assessment.

Overall, the originality and assessment – these two concepts are working in tandem and the deeper and the keen the evaluation is made the bigger are chances to obtain a high level of originality.

Translated from Romanian by Cristina Șuteu

²⁵ De la Rosa, Miguel A. “Thinking up an original scientific research project”. *Turkish Journal of Biochemistry*. published online November 25, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1515/tjb-2020-0503>

²⁶ Ghircoiașiu, Romeo, „Clasificarea științelor muzicale și unele probleme de obiect și metodă” (Classification of musical sciences and some problems of object and method) In *Lucrări de muzicologie*, vol. 8-9, Cluj-Napoca, 1978, p. 15.

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