Formal Authorship in the Wake of Uncertain Futures: The Narrative of Publish or Perish in the Humanities

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Abstract: Publish or Perish has a variety of meanings. Most often, the term is understood as a reference to the material requirements of publishing relentlessly in order to make or advance a career in contemporary academia. In this article, I show that Publish or Perish is also a cultural narrative that provides a formal rationalistic solution to the uncertainty of early career scholars. Funds are scarce, competition is fierce, the individual future within academia is unknown—the Publish or Perish narrative claims that if you just keep publishing, you can overcome these obstacles. This narrative is perpetuated among aspiring scholars and creates peer pressure where it exerts its power to a certain extent regardless of material requirements, especially in the humanities. Based on extensive discussion of literature and data from a qualitative study with humanities scholars in Germany and the UK, employing a cultural sociological approach, I trace the meaning of Publish or Perish as this narrative. I look at how it is passed on among early career scholars, and how senior scholars respond to it in situations of mentorship and supervision. This perspective emphasizes the importance of everyday situations that trigger anxiety, as well as the importance of mentorship as a crucial means of reducing such anxiety. This is pertinent to reforms of evaluation practices that tend to abstract from such mundane situations. The notion of the slippery slope (Hartmut Rosa) helps comprehend this anxiety.

Keywords: publish or perish; humanities; formal authorship; mentorship; cultural narrative; resonance theory; alienation; uncontrollability.

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Introduction: Publishing Against an Uncertain Future

Writing this, I face an uncertain future. I stand on the slippery slope (Rosa 2019) of the early academic career in Western academia. Will I be able to secure a position in this academy? Will this position allow me to exist as a scholar? Will my intellectual programme—initiated during a doctorate and developed during postdoctoral positions—lead to further projects, enabling me to apply for more grants, carve out arguments as papers, and be of interest in order to highlight my endeavour and secure positions at conferences?

Early-career scholars are not alone with such questions. They are in a community with peers who face the same uncertainties. This community is escorted by series of informative events and talks, across major universities, about how to produce more output to craft an impressive, productively-looking CV. There is a wealth of self-help literature on offer to this community. Among many others, there are bestselling books such as *Publish Don't Perish* with *100 tips that improve your ability to get published* (Lussier 2010), or *How to Write a Lot* (Silvia 2019). There is Harzing's publish or perish software that 'is designed to help individual academics to present their case for research impact to its best advantage, even if you have very few citations' (2019), accompanied by *The Publish or Perish Tutorial* (Harzing 2016). Such self-help advice is not new; it is a persistent theme (Glatthorn 2002; Hills 1987; Wa-Mbaleka 2021). And it goes beyond a focus on output. Aspiring scholars will find works such as Kelsky's bestselling book about getting tenure by focussing everything on the key pillars of constructing a competitive, CV-driven personality; the book kickstarts with expertise on *when, where, and what to publish* (Kelsky 2015). And as an example of institutional self-improvement, universities in the UK spend millions on *mock* Research Excellence Framework (REF) examinations, assessing the *REFability* of individual scholars and their publications and impact reports to improve for the *actual* evaluation (Farla and Simmonds 2015; Neto et al. 2023).

Such self-help guides and improvement exercises are connected by a meaningful narrative. It claims that the uncertainty of the future is reduced, most of all, by the counting and bureaucratic accounting of formally published output. Scholarly dialogue, the essence of the humanities in the sense of a communicative exchange of thought, is a secondary issue in this perspective. The quality of the latter may be important in the long run. But primarily it is today's production of output that counts. This deep narrative is persistent among communities of aspiring scholars, being passed on at conferences or colloquia, reinforced by suggestive talk of *competitive CVs* and *REFability*. This narrative provides a formal rationalist logic to an anxiety-suffused structure; it suggests that doing all things necessary to produce output will, per principle, allow you to at least stand a chance in the unrelenting academy. If you publish more, your chances will be more promising. If you publish with particular publishers, your chances are likely to increase even more. And if you publish today rather than tomorrow, you really take matters in your own hands. You can create your own career, this narrative suggests; only be sure that you publish. This is the narrative of *publish or perish*.

The Meaningfulness of Formal Authorship and Publish or Perish

In this article, I am concerned with the meaning of *publish or perish* in the humanities, and how it is passed on among peers and in mentorship relations. How do scholars in the humanities understand and convey what is often referred to as *publish or perish* (POP)? Answering this question is essential to understanding an aspect of evaluation practices in the humanities that is too often neglected. It is a cultural aspect that is rooted in the discourse of everyday life, and it abstracts from materiality by added symbolic meaning and a self-reinforcing narrative. This materiality and its symbolic meaning are best described by the notion of formal authorship. Formal authorship is a mode of authorship that is valuable not just because of the authorial content it is an attribute of; it is a mode of authorship that is meaningful also relatively independent of this content.

All motivation in social life is conditioned by culture in a way that its symbolic background knowledge—referred to as discourse—gives meaning to things in the lifeworld of actors (Alexander and Smith 2001; Habermas 1987). A scholar perceives a publication not simply as published text; shared thought, textual style, bibliographic references all exert a symbolic meaning that goes beyond the surface. It points to deeper structural patterns that add meaning (Geertz 1973). And it is in this sense that the formal features of a traditional publication exert a specific symbolic meaning of trust, reliability, and productivity. Like a branded stamp, formal features such as author name, DOI, publication date, and the name of an established journal (among others) in combination assert a right to account for the substantive text in a shortcut form on personal lists of publications such as the CV.[1] It appears as a right (or convention) to showcase productivity through trusted formalities, since it is included in a known publication venue (a journal, book programme, collected edition, et c.).

*In*formal authorship can result from a variety of ways to publicise text. We can think of social media, blogs, informal working papers, or even preprints; teaching formats must also be acknowledged here.[2] But the crucial element of this analytic distinction appears in the way scholarly substance is taken into account *after* publication. Formal authorship allows others to consider content through these formal features; without such features, such consideration is not viable. Where competition in the academic job market is a competition on abstract publication lists (i.e., where publication lists are screened instead of text qualitatively judged),[3] the analytic category of formal authorship provides a useful reference. It is often only because of the attachment to such formal features that, in job or grant application procedures, the number of publications on personal lists of publications can be considered.[4] This is justified by pointing towards peer review. In the end, peer review seems essential for separating the established publication from mere manuscript today and, thus, separating formal from informal authorship. Peer review provides trust in this sense. Whether or not such a justification is justified in itself, and whether or not peer review works well in the humanities, are not to be answered here. The focus of this study is on what POP does.

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[1] Note that this terminology is no value statement; the separation of in-/formal and references to substantive text not necessarily imply judgements of better or worse standards.

[2] We might think of a seminar or lecture series in which a scholar develops ideas (maybe even in dialogue with students). The rich, often posteriorly published archive of such settings shows the way the informal is turned into formal authorship.

[3] To be sure, the practice of screening publication lists by no means implies that text is no longer being read in general. This authorship category should not be misread in this direction.

[4] To be sure, this attachment itself as well as the mutual reinforcement of material base and symbolic meaning alone cannot explain the genesis of the importance of formal authorship. The current text can only be an outline of the mechanism, while the genesis as a whole requires more work.

Moreover, by way of a counterexample, we can think of the historical *authority* that is asserted through the writing, publishing, and reception of a substantial piece.[5] This is *not* the authority that is asserted by formal authorship. It is impossible to judge scholarly substance through formal features or to assert substantive authority through a personal list of publications alone. And yet, still, such lists substantially account for productivity in a way that more informal ways of authorship—simply the written text—do not do.

The symbolic nature that is behind the emphasis on formal authorship becomes more visible once we take into account the dialectical nature of material requirement and symbolic meaning. There are indeed major research funders who separate formal and informal publications (DFG 2022). But the UK's REF does not do so; it invites a wide variety of input and it is executed on substantial reading (REF 2019). Nevertheless, it is particularly in the context of this framework that scholars in the humanities talk about a requirement to conform to the formalities of traditional publishing (Knöchelmann 2023a). In their case study of Danish humanities scholars, Rowlands and Wright (2021) confirm such an emphasis on formal authorship which, in their terminology, is a *hunting for points* based on formal publication categories. As this study further shows, adjusting publishing practices according to formal authorship is more salient in the humanities than in the natural sciences (where scientometrics is overall more established) as well as more pertinent among junior than among senior scholars. This points to the discursive construction of the value of formal authorship; it has a symbolic meaning that surpasses the surface of material requirements.

POP thrives on this meaningfulness. Actors draw on this discursive background knowledge to make sense of what is required of them, of what they are supposed to do. More specifically—as the narrative introduction to this article shows and as will be elaborated on below—POP has the distinct form of a narrative. As Smith states: 'culture operates as a tool for understanding, a tool for predicting, a tool for evaluating […] action because action is held accountable to narrative' (Smith 2005). It is in this sense that aspiring scholars talk to mentors about what they should do to advance in their careers. Mentors give advice to their mentees. University management guides scholars in terms of excellence impact and *REFability*. Aspiring scholars utter remarks of frustration about CVs and apparent requirements among peers. Senior scholars complain about systemic decline in scholarly ability because of early overproduction. In all these cases, scholars reinforce the specific meaning of a social phenomenon and pass it on; they position what is symbolically meaningful within the framework of a narrative. Reconstructing this meaning-making and the ways this narrative is passed on among scholars is the knowledge interest of this article.

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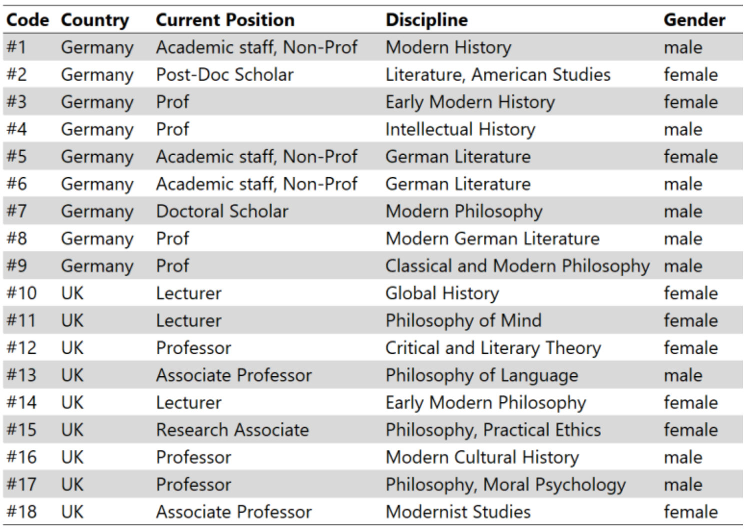
[5] See for a discussion of different functions of authorship in and for scholarship (cf. Hyland 2015; Shorley and Jubb 2013).

Research Design

The data gathering for this study was conducted among scholars in core humanities disciplines in Germany and the UK. The primary focus of this study was to understand publishing motivations. The institutionalisation of scholars in the two countries was used as cases to comprehend how national or departmental structures impact these motivations, and what effect other factors have in relation; culture, scholarly tradition, and ideals of scholarliness inherently come together in these relations. While UK scholars work under the long-term impression of the REF, there is no such mature and all-encompassing evaluation scheme in Germany. Nevertheless, the *Exzellenzinitiative* begins to exert a similar cultural effect. In short, German humanities scholars slowly catch up in the way their research management becomes geared to metrics, but they remain more independent still, compared to UK colleagues. This development was instrumental for the comparative study in Knöchelmann (2023a) where the issues are discussed in more detail.

This study was conducted in 2019/2020 and it accompanied a larger quantitative survey (n=1,177) in the same empirical context and overall cohort. However, in this article, I focus on the qualitative data in order to hermeneutically-reconstruct a specific aspect of POP that found only little space in the publication following the overall study (Knöchelmann 2023a), but that figured prominently in the interviews. The *prevalence* of issues (such as publishing pressure across academic positions or numbers of publications) that was predominantly studied through quantitative data is not itself of interest in the current article.

All interviews were conducted via video link, telephone, or in person. The selection of interviewees of both studies was based on an iterative approach, such that the interviews should reach a sufficient size and equal distribution across certain parameters (gender, seniority, university environment, disciplinary specification). Table 1 shows an overview of the anonymised interview participants.



Code	Country	Current Position	Discipline	Gender
#1	Germany	Academic staff, Non-Prof	Modern History	male
#2	Germany	Post-Doc Scholar	Literature, American Studies	female
#3	Germany	Prof	Early Modern History	female
#4	Germany	Prof	Intellectual History	male
#5	Germany	Academic staff, Non-Prof	German Literature	female
#6	Germany	Academic staff, Non-Prof	German Literature	male
#7	Germany	Doctoral Scholar	Modern Philosophy	male
#8	Germany	Prof	Modern German Literature	male
#9	Germany	Prof	Classical and Modern Philosophy	male
#10	UK	Lecturer	Global History	female
#11	UK	Lecturer	Philosophy of Mind	female
#12	UK	Professor	Critical and Literary Theory	female
#13	UK	Associate Professor	Philosophy of Language	male
#14	UK	Lecturer	Early Modern Philosophy	female
#15	UK	Research Associate	Philosophy, Practical Ethics	female
#16	UK	Professor	Modern Cultural History	male
#17	UK	Professor	Philosophy, Moral Psychology	male
#18	UK	Associate Professor	Modernist Studies	female

Table 1: Overview of study participants.

Themes that guided the (semi-structured) questionnaire included:

- overall motivations/reasons to publish;
- specific considerations of authorship, publishing pressure, and publish or perish;
- concerns with publishing practices and the nature of a publication in the specific discipline;
- authorship and publishing in the context of national or institutional requirements and administration (particularly the REF and the German *Exzellenzinitiative*);
- adjacent issues such as mentorship, guidance, and technological or policy changes in contemporary academia more general.

The interviews were semi-structured, guided by but not limited to these themes. Interviews were conducted in English with scholars in the UK, and in German with scholars in Germany; attention was paid to differences in terminology during the interviews to allow for comparability.[6] Written consent was obtained for all interviews to ensure voluntary participation. Furthermore, all interviewees were informed about anonymization in order to facilitate a trusting conversation. All interviews were transcribed and analysed twice, employing an abductive coding approach, using NVIVO 12pro, resulting in 590 and 224 codes, respectively. During the subsequent original analysis, I used these codes to develop a structured understanding from within the lifeworlds of the interviewed actors. For this article, I conducted another round of deep reading of both interviews and codes, vis-à-vis existing literature, with a specific focus on the theme underlying my research interest.

As a disclaimer, it needs to be said that the focus of this study is Western academia, particularly financially relatively-well positioned scholars in the UK and Germany. These are not representative of academia globally; in the sampling as well as in the accounted literature, there is a bias towards what might be called: establishment.[7] Future studies may well compare the issues discussed here with other regions, and across hierarchies of power that structure contemporary academia. Moreover, as is visible in table 1 and further outlined in Knöchelmann (2023a), disciplinary attention focussed on core humanities disciplines; new developments, particularly those in Digital Humanities (as a discipline, not a practice), transcend established scholarly ideals and, thus, give rise to new practices of authorship and publishing. These new formations were not studied, meaning that no representative of a discipline such as Digital Humanities was interviewed. The intention of my study was to understand the inertia of tradition and how new managerial practices (such as through the REF or the *Exzellenzinitiative*) are met within these more traditional disciplines.

As outlined above, I consider POP to be the form of a narrative with symbolic meaning in a strong cultural sociological perspective (cf. Alexander and Smith 2001, 2018). Social action and discourse—for instance in the context of writing, publishing, and talking about this among peers—draws on underlying structures of symbolic meaning. Sociological analysis requires determining these meaningful depths to highlight what guides and motivates actions. In other words, everyday attributions to authorship and publishing are not arbitrary; they are guided by such structural symbols with 'a level of organization that patterns action as surely as structures of a more visible, material kind' (Alexander and Smith 1993). Within interviews, as in other situations of topic-focussed conversations, such structures can take the form of references, both concrete or abstract, internal narratives, or justifications. Interviews, thus, aid the researcher's 'interpretation and reconstruction of meaning' (Reed 2017) by allowing access to the empirical reality of actors next to the knowledges derived from existing literature. I do not aim to answer questions of how much (or much more than before) scholars publish. The following exploration can hardly make generalizations in quantitative terms; it focusses on the quality of the empirical reality of an experienced POP regime.[8]

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[6] In the sections below, all quotes of German scholars are translated by the author.

[7] In previous work, I have looked, with a Gramscian perspective, at existing epistemic injustices in scholarly communication myself (Knöchelmann 2021).

The result of this interpretation is presented in the following structure. Firstly, I review core literature concerned with POP. This will provide the background for comprehending the social phenomenon and its historical context. Secondly, I present findings from qualitative interviews. This will specify the phenomenon and provide details about how it is passed on discursively among aspiring scholars as well as in mentorship relations. This is followed by a discussion, using Rosa's social theory of acceleration and resonance to highlight the working principle of this narrative.

The Origins of Publish or Perish

The precise origin of POP as a term is obscure. Scholars often refer to a—relatively—recent article written to explore in more depth where the term was coined. It is penned by Garfield (1996)—a scholar today mostly known for his work in bibliometrics. Garfield sees the origin of POP in either a statement Marshall McLuhan made in a letter to Ezra Pound in 1951, or a descriptive account of prestige in research cultures written by Logan Wilson in 1942 (*The Academic Man*).[9] Both of these mentions are in quotation marks, however, leaving it uncertain whether they were coined or merely referenced by either of the two scholars.

In a study of the mobility and promotion patterns of US-based economics faculty in relation to their publishing activity, Skeels and Fairbanks state that '[i]t is very interesting to note this analysis suggests that quantity of publication rather than quality may be more important in explaining promotion patterns' (1968). Though it is difficult to transfer findings to other disciplines, this study nonetheless offers early indications that measurable quantity fares higher than subjective quality. This leads Skeels and Fairbanks to conclude, via a circular argument, that the more competent publishing scholars may also be the more competent teaching scholars. A decade later, in 1977, Relman found harsh words against the consequences of wrong incentives of a publishing regime. He stresses the 'inflation of bibliographies' and a 'seductive kind of dishonesty' effected by a climate of POP, resulting in a practice that 'distorts the prime purpose of scientific reporting, which, after all, is the communication of new information and ideas, not self-aggrandizement' (Relman 1977). We can find an early proponent of POP in Hexter as he connects dots between the 1968 student revolts and publishing requirements: he grounds the first broad publicization of the POP slogan in the protests that happened amid the rejection of a scholar at a high impact research university who had not got 'already published work of considerable distinction' (1969). Lofthouse draws—partly in response to Hexter—the focus away from the question of the desirability of POP towards a questioning of its existence (1974). And, indeed, these accounts about POP hardly differentiate between material requirements and cultural discourse.

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[8] *Experienced* here indicates a truth in the subjective, as is common in cultural sociology. The subjectivity of actors might appear as an individualized, anecdotal instance; but it builds on discourse beyond this individual surface that a structural hermeneutics can investigate to arrive at more general conclusions (cf. Alexander and Smith 2001, 2018).

[9] Other compelling implicit reference to POP in public culture can be found in, for instance, the novels of Carr (2000) or Byatt (1991).

This brief look at early references of POP shows that there is no inherent connection of POP to any discipline, let alone a coherent meaning. Nevertheless, its uptake in discourse on the sciences shows how it is often attributed to scientific or social scientific publishing regimes (Bunz 2005; Carrigan 1991; Clapham 2005; Ding 2001; Graber et al. 2008; Hamilton 1990; Mackay 1974).[10] This scientistic perspective might also be attributable to the cultural fact that employing bibliometrics for measuring the productivity of individuals is more common in the sciences than it is in the humanities (Brembs et al. 2013; Lariviere and Sugimoto 2018; McKiernan et al. 2019; Niles et al. 2020; Vanclay 2012), though the humanities are by no means invisible in terms of bibliometrics (Franssen and Wouters 2019; Hammarfelt and Haddow 2018).

However, looking at origins of POP requires going beyond a terminological determinism; that is, problems of the sort of *formal authorship* existed way before the term *Publish or Perish* came into being. Authorship slowly became a symbolic category already during the scientific revolution, as accounts of British or German eminences show (Josephson 2014; Shapin 1994). But it was predominantly a qualitative issue of writing style, publishing venue, and their combined marketability in a growing competition of ideas. As soon as *scientific* achievement was accounted for through indices, authorship became a formal category also in a quantitative way such that certain formalities allowed to primitively count authorship. The authorial honour that the reputation of a well published writer in the humanities bestowed upon a university (Josephson 2014) thus turned into a quantitative accountability.

Indices were welcomed for a number of reasons in the nineteenth century, most of all since they allowed the scientific community as well as wider society to access the body of scientific knowledge more efficiently (Beaver 1972; Csiszar 2017a).[11] In addition, such indices enabled the emerging nation states to be ranked according to their scientific productivity, and to sort individuals within nationalist confines. Already at that stage, the symbolic value of authorship and its formal denominators was immense since it was used for narrating the strengths of nations, which in return fuelled investment according to bureaucratic management. That the 'tool for managing information became a tool for managing scientists' (Knöchelmann 2025) is therefore by no means a recent development. Csiszar draws a direct line from these indices to the formation of POP. The possibility of formal authorship allowed a new narrative to form. In negative commentary, this connection surfaced in 1932 as: 'masses of unreadable trash [that is] published by ambitious scholars hoping to strengthen their applications' (Csiszar 2017b).

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[10] The origins of a structural pressure to publish and the recognition of academic contributions by means of generalised publishing output are generally more explicitly rooted in the sciences, particularly in the US and the systemic enforcement of state-funded project work, often attributed to Vannevar Bush after WW2 (Schachman 2006). Not only did this set off a new period of politically motivated interference in scientific research, it also successively triggered the employment of technocratic rule and bureaucratic competition.

[11] Of interest here are particularly those indices that helped sort science by means of authorship, such as: (Field et al. 1899; Royal Society 1914).

Today, POP is presented in manifold ways, which testify to its pervasiveness as a cultural symbol. We can find it to fare as a reference to: an age (Rosa 2010), an aphorism (Rond and Miller 2005), a climate (Relman 1977), a culture (van Dalen and Henkens 2012), a doctrine (Moosa 2018), a *Fluch* (German: curse; Könneker 2018), a *Grundgesetz* (German: constitutional law; Barth 2019), an ideology (Vannini 2006), a mantra (Guraya et al. 2016), a phenomenon (Miller et al. 2011), a syndrome (Colpaert 2012), or a system (Lee 2014). This diversity shows how pervasively POP lingers in the background of contemporary academia as well as how difficult it is to capture what it really means. There is common ground in all these references; it is a cultural reinforcement based on a material foundation. The former will be examined in more detail below. Before that, we will briefly look at relevant research findings that pertain specifically to the humanities.

Publish or Perish: Systemic Issues and the Humanities

Literature is available on the structural causes and consequences of a pressure to publish, often attributed to the development of wrong productivity regimes. This concerns particularly the REF (Archer 2008; Baggeley 2007; Knöchelmann 2023a; Martin 2011; Shackleton and Booth 2015), or metrics and evaluation regimes more generally (Cronin 2001; Hammarfelt and Haddow 2018; Kulczycki 2023; Muller 2018; van Dalen 2021). This critical work aligns in many points with assessments of academia in the UK beyond the REF (Brink 2018; Frank et al. 2019; Sperlinger et al. 2018; UCU 2013). A growing body of literature also focusses on individual instances of assessment and evaluation in the humanities. It shows, primarily, that there is a constant need to challenge persistent myths. The confusion is, for instance, that humanities arguments against all too simple metrification imply that quality is hard to pinpoint in the humanities. The fact that the humanities have a different scholarly culture that is less responsive to quantifiable metrics (HEFCE 2015; Ploder et al. 2023) should not lead to the assumption that they cannot also generate generalizable standards for rating (van den Akker 2016). Quality is an abstractly rather empty signifier that becomes meaningful only in specific contexts (Guetzkow et al. 2004; Lamont 2009). Still, formalities introduced from outside are becoming increasingly important. A visible tendency here is that external discourse is responsible for internal shifts of meaning in evaluation practices, as the rhetoric on excellence shows (Brink 2018; Lamont 2009; Moore et al. 2016).

A detailed critique of such confrontation between disciplinary meaning and external research management can be found in Münch's work. Münch studies German and European research policy and funding developments with a materialist reasoning strongly influenced by Bourdieu. Among the many insights that can be drawn from his work, the way performance-oriented allocation of research funds recursively provide wrong incentives stands out (Münch 2008). It results a market for funding in which ideas are reduced to interchangeable currency. This pushes scholarly meaningfulness to artificial grounds, formalizes it in marketable packages, and skews the more organic—scholarly—competition in favour of the materially most advantaged actor or institution. Managing by ranking and rhetoric, and the construction of the audit university are both causes and consequences that ultimately deteriorate independent scholarly conduct (Münch 2007, 2011). Particularly aspiring scholars have to conform to this new conduct, which can construct a clash between generations, similar to what Nästesjö identifies (see below). The result of such new practices is that *Matthew beats Humboldt*, as Meier and Schimank laconically state (2009). The case of the *Forschungsrating* in Germany is an insightful example, as it constructed a test procedure similar to the UK's REF, albeit in a much weakened form. In essence, research productivity in the discipline of English and American Studies was assessed by reviewing submitted exemplary publications; details reveal that categories of assessment were not problematic (Hornung et al. 2016). Critical issues reside much rather in the overall endeavour itself, since the scholarly 'community provides constant and ample feedback' themselves (Plag 2016). This case study illustrates how a focus on material criteria can neglect a long-term view of cultural—seemingly softer—conditions. Even though the material requirements seem benign, the potential for a discourse that reduces the scholar persona to a singular objective of highly selective research findings is nonetheless present.

Taking on such a cultural perspective, criticism of POP is also found with a stronger orientation towards authorship practices. Collini vigorously pronounces the necessity and value of the qualitative in all forms of humanities scholarship: from the cogency of humanities writing to publications and its forms of assessment and evaluation (2012). Interestingly, this humanities literature is sometimes in dissonance with bibliometric research (as referred to above) in the context of evaluation research. Higher quantities of output or the enforcement of publication metrification—natural scientistic citation practices or crude impact reports—are posited to be detrimental to the ideals of humanities scholarship. Relatable to Collini, Crane finds devastating consequences in the 'institutionally generated pressures to publish' in philosophy (2018). Not only does this pressure gave rise to a massification of scholarly publications; it also developed practices of gatekeeping submissions that is detrimental to the philosophical debate. Such critical accounts align with more fundamental critiques that focus on a decline of the humanities that no longer uphold their ideals of a community of dissensus (Readings 1999), which, in the long run, has consequences for democratic society (Nussbaum 2010). All such accounts are much less concerned with material requirements than with culture, which demand a closer look at their interplay.

Most influential for advancing a progressive debate in the humanities is the work of Fitzpatrick's (2011, 2012, 2019) as well as a wider focus on media provided by Jubb (2017) or Lyons and Rayner (2015). Fitzpatrick works out the negative consequences of prevailing assumptions on writing and reception, and the many steps that range in between the two. Particularly strong is her exploration of how digital technology can facilitate new environments for collaborative approaches to authorship or peer review, discussing conceptual paradigms that allow qualitative scholarship to thrive as well as technological solutions that facilitate this. The worth of this discussion is its non-reductionism vis-à-vis POP; it evades the technological determinism often found in, for instance, open access advocacy.[12] Such perspectives on media are important. Digital technology has enabled easy publications so that scholarly communication faces an unprecedented competition of potential voices. Publishing monographs is easy today, not to speak of releasing your own journal. It is this potential that has contributed to an unprecedented number of publications and, in response, reinforced the emphasis on established venues. *Formal authorship* would not be such a pervasive category today without this technological enablement; the potential of *informal* authorship made this significance possible in the first place.

Moreover, specific work is done already on the ways early career scholars have to navigate uncertainty. In the wake of such uncertainty, even mentorship and guidance from senior colleagues can have limited usefulness since, in 'the absence of a clear standard of quality or success, they must decide whose judgment to trust' (Nästesjö 2021). Nästesjö shows qualitatively how aspiring scholars navigate guidance that might be useful to the improvement of scholarly content but does not seem to lead to formal authorship that advances a career. To cope with this situation, junior scholars 'more frequently come to rely upon the judgment of younger assessors' (Nästesjö 2021). While this is a crucial insight that directs attention to the reinforcement and acceptance of evaluation standards, this does not elaborate further on how conflicting instances of guidance and peer pressure built up. That is, even though junior scholars reflect on whom to trust for advancing in their careers, they might still get into conversations with conflicting parties (seniors who advise on publishing less). Similarly, peer pressure seems to fit into the guidance in the way Nästesjö describes; nevertheless, this can exert a negative pressure, nonetheless. It is in exploring the latter that the following empirical exploration provides a complimentary perspective (on means) to the more ends focussed study of Nästesjö.

The Empirical Reality of Publish or Perish in the Humanities

The Narrative of Publish or Perish

Conversations with scholars about their publishing practices exemplify a bleak acknowledgement that publishing is, first and foremost, a formal requirement. Reasons to publish do not seem to be grounded primarily in the aim to communicate, but 'largely in order to ensure that it's possible for me to remain in this career' (#12). Scholars clarify that they 'need to publish in order to stay in the job and get the next job- get grants' (#15).

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[12] Fitzpatrick well balances the technological perspective, just as she explains that 'technologies and cultures are mutually determining and thus must evolve in concert' (2011).

Others embark on longer explanations on how they are supposed to publish to fulfil quotas in the sense of REF statements. Publishing in certain established ways appears almost natural where scholars say that 'we're obliged to do so [publish]- I'm paid to do so' (#3), or 'you cannot begin your career without published output' (#18). There is the sense of an enforcement of a 'frantic dash' (#17) towards producing more publications by a somewhat invisible hand, irrespective of the products' scholarly meaningfulness. In return, publications are meaningful, at first, for accruing instances on the personal authorship list; only secondarily, in the long run, might some of these become meaningful to the scholarly debate.

Certainly, a few scholars concede that a certain structural encouragement to publish can be fruitful. It might motivate (especially senior) scholars who have abandoned publishing to make their work accessible outside the seminar room. The problem, however, is that what is experienced as POP is much more than such encouragement. In its extremes, it reduces publishing to one dimension and lets scholars look at their future almost singularly in this one dimension. It is important to remember that it is not directly material structures or evaluation practices themselves that are meant here. This also becomes clear in the interviews. It is a background discourse that affects the motivation for publication and seems to reduce evaluations to a single dimension from the perspective of the actors. What is paradigmatically referred to as POP appears as a narrative in this background discourse. It thrives and elaborates on a specific meaning of authorship and publishing in the sense of formal authorship as a yield in its own right. It seems to simplify a way forward; a future in academia becomes possible by means of formal authorship.[13] The narrative nature (Breithaupt 2022) of this is defined by a beginning: the insecurity of a position vis-à-vis short contracts and formal research assessments; a way forward: publications are required in certain ways to ensure both easily visible productivity (for the numbers) *and* a few high quality publications (for closer inspection); and an end: a more secure, permanent position, long-term grants, et c. This narrative captures a sentiment—often expressed as frustration, anger, or despondency—and it can even take the form of a natural force, a reification of the narrative's truth; to publish more so as to accrue formal authorship appears as a law-like principle, seemingly objectively-cemented in academia, even though hard facts—such as crude publication numbers—are rarely demanded, specifically not in the humanities. This background discourse often emerges in the interviews with reference to *conversations among peers* as well as in situations of *mentorship and guidance*.

Conversations Among Peers

The narrative is passed on among peers. A mid-level scholar (#11) explains that 'there's a lot of social pressure to just publish as much as you can' and 'a real sort of- I think- bias is the word- just- I don't know- assumption around that if you publish a lot more that you're better in some way'. Her explanation exemplifies the reification caused by such conversations among peers and the bias it evokes: 'I think- there's just quite a lot of almost casual- well they have the best papers and such and such- or- well they don't really publish very much' (#11).

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[13] To be sure, this by no means implies that this *is* a path towards a secure future. It is particular to the humanities that the opposite might be the case: that publishing less and suppressing the meaning of POP might be more worthwhile. Though the subsequent sections will relate to this in the way the interviewees do, this article cannot make a statement about whether either way is indeed more successful.

As aspiring scholars engage in this narrative—primarily here among peers, but also with supervisors or mentors—they reproduce both its cause and consequences. A senior scholar in Germany is explicit about how the pressure is partly evoked by engagement with this narrative itself, where early career scholars 'talk about this to each other' (#3). There are conversations about what is required to be 'internationally competitive' and 'what is required to get a starting grant' (#3). All these evaluation instances are read through the lens of formal performativity, but the instances themselves do not necessarily prescribe formal authorship materially (in terms of *hard* facts of required publications).[14] Talking about careers or future grants does not as such require this sort of list of publications. To be sure, career promotion or grant pressure has a material impact in the way they require such lists; but the social pressure reinforces and even leverages a conformism to this impact. The narrative captures both ends: by naturalising the aura of this list it highlights the necessity to conform.

The social pressure is echoed in a younger scholar's account of a rather private, informal situation that provoked to think of having to fulfil some form of natural quota. Note how she evokes the aura of comparability by means of formalisms:

> you remember writing job applications and friends sending me kind of their CV and so I could model my own CV on how they laid out stuff- I just find it really distressing looking at this enormous list of publications that they had- just feeling- kind of inadequate in relation to that. So it is kind of I guess the feeling of pressure is one of comparing yourself to other people. (#15)

Another scholar exemplifies this anxiety based on comparability. He, likewise, refers to the casualty and simplicity of the ways pressure is imbricated with everyday issues; small, seemingly irrelevant instances remind him of publishing more:

> if for instance I apply and I am told- state your five *most important* publications and I only have five publications- then this confronts me with the impression that I should have more so that I could choose from all my publications the five essential ones. (#6)

This peer induced pressure can even turn into outright competitive talk. An accomplished professor in Germany abstracts what he experiences among younger scholars as a rivalry where 'people are distressed- if they haven't published several articles before they hand in their PhD thesis' (#8). It is illuminating to witness how he perceives that this rivalry precedes all intellectual development. The narrative's comparative formalism has to be dealt with in that one's scholarship is to be adapted *to it*: 'first of all there is an abstract pressure to publish and only then comes the question- what is actually to be published' (#8). Similarly, an early career philologist in Germany (#2) explains how such competitiveness arises even out of banal everyday conversations such as end of year checks on productivity when each scholar has to report on her formal output: 'in a way you don't want to be that person who, at the end of the year, has to say- well I don't have anything', she admits. Such conversations, usually a matter of administrative discourse, become more important by way of being sacralised through its relation to the narrative. The talk could be merely philistine management; but it becomes a means of social pressure by visibilising individual competitiveness.

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[14] Even the largest German funding body, the DFG, which makes an implacable distinction between formal and informal authorship, does not require a certain number of publications. However, they do contribute to the impression of doing so by stating to consider only a 'maximum of ten of the applicants' most important' publications (DFG 2022), implying that scholars at the postdoctoral level tend to have more.

Tuning out this social pressure—including withdrawing from such peer conversations—is one possible strategy to avoid the fear of underachieving. Only having a permanent job might be a better way to break away from POP. A mid-level lecturer in history in the UK (#10) who got a permanent position early in her career is aware of how lucky she is particularly as it enables her to shut out part of the discourse and the feeling of uncertainty that it brings with it. My conversation with her reflected how she knows about both the social pressure and the affect this produces to engage in instrumentalising publishing, and that the situation changes once a scholar reaches a permanent position. She escaped the pressure and adapted her practices accordingly: 'if I didn't have a permanent job- I would probably be trying to publish more' (#10). Witness also the mid-level scholar again, who (claims to) try to 'tune those voices out' so as to reserve, what she calls, an integrity in publishing; an integrity to not participate in 'gamey' publishing practices:

> I think that there are ways to publish and still have integrity [laughs]. […] I just think that's more difficult- because there's a lot of pressure to do it in a way that I myself find compromised- you know- intellectually compromised. (#11)

Similarly, consider a mid-career scholar who talks about the persistent pressure to publish she experienced during graduate school and early postdoctoral work. During that time, she became conscious about POP and the partly self-infused anxiety. It felt destructive for her intellectual development just as it did for her ambitious colleagues. Hoping for radical ideas and change in this respect, she came to the conclusion that

> [j]ournals should not accept articles by graduate students. […] these people should be exploring- they shouldn't be trying to write all these journal articles- we shouldn't be doing this. (#14)

A young philosopher in Germany (#7) demonstrated such an intellectual resilience, and it allowed him a renewed resonance with his scholarship. He showed himself to be knowledgeable about POP and the widespread anxiety it creates but has found a strategy to focus on his scholarly development against what he explicitly referred to as an instrumentalization of his scholarship:

> I think that somehow- that it takes on a life on its own and you could take the freedom to say- well I'm still doing a PhD and maybe two papers suffice and it doesn't need to be five- interestingly only few people take this freedom during their PhD perhaps out of anxiety- an anxiety that is being instilled. (#7)

Mentorship and Guidance

Senior scholars, almost across the conversations, made the strong impression that their mentorship counters the formal rationalistic logic of the narrative, or at least tries to do so. Simply publishing for the numbers does not suffice; it most likely will even be harmful to a successful career. Nevertheless, lack of knowledge about what is actually going on is among the most pressing concerns. 'Young scholars are often not yet intelligible about how publishing works' (#18), and this lets them be drawn towards early, careless publishing. Aspiring scholars are persuaded by the formal rationalistic logic that suggests a plannable future. Where an idea—or guidance to it—on what matters in the long run is missing, POP compels them to follow the 'frantic dash' (#17) towards publishing early and too much. The dilemma is quite visible in the conversations with senior scholars who consider themselves to be caught in between a seemingly natural requirement passed on among early career scholars, and their own ideals of valuing quality over quantity, careful deliberation over instrumentalising scholarship for the CV. Yet, articulating this dilemma does not necessarily mean that mentorship by senior scholars actually alleviates the problem.

A senior scholar in Germany explained that the core consequence of instrumentalising publishing is not simply the number of publications. It is a directionality in publishing in the sense of constructing a somewhat formally representative publication list; aspiring scholars have to face questions such as 'what do you want with such a publication now-this doesn't make sense on your CV' (#2). Since it needs to be representative not for an individual scholarly identity-in-the-making but for a fashionable scholarly trend, this systemically leads to canonization and conformism. It is striking how interviewees align in showing frustration over the devaluation of scholarly dispute as a result of this. This appears in the form of both dissatisfaction and helplessness where there is 'quite strong status quo biases' (#11) in the way publishing works. But being non-conformist is a challenging solution, too.

The case of a literary theory professor is telling in this respect. She is profoundly upset about the development of scholarly dispute more generally alongside an increasing over-publication, claiming that 'a lot of the quality is extraordinarily poor' and that 'young researchers are being trained to- even when they're clearly very bright people- to write very general accounts' (#12). Traditional values of qualitative judgement, deliberation, and scholarship as an end in itself are held high in this conversation, and it is set to oppose the principles of the 'publication game':

> I also say that to my students- on the one hand what I do makes it much more difficult for them to get a career- because I'm not following what everybody else does. But on the other hand- bizarrely- paradoxically- it can also actually make it possible for them still to have an academic career. […] I sit down with them I show them all the rankings. I tell them it's nonsense and they know that anyway from their own reading because- you know- they're good scholars- so they know they're reading a lot of rubbish. But I say what you have to do for your career is you publish in the top journals […]. (#12)

This opposition is not based on progress, though. The underlying traditionalism here invokes these values to play a specific role in this game in which the rationalistic logic of POP remains the same. Peer pressure to publish is not silenced, but its focus is shifted to a different, perhaps elitist, regime. Another senior scholar in the UK is also clear about the advice he gives young scholars. He showed himself to be thoughtful about contemporary publishing practices, and much less frustrated with the quality of scholarly dispute on a—similarly elitist—reasoning that the long tail of bad publications is not to be considered in the first place. For this scholar, 'the people who publish their PhDs as monographs too quickly tend to do less well in the job market because- precisely because they haven't taken the time and effort to improve it' (#16); 'people would be better off trying harder- waiting longer- you know getting better feedback- getting more peer review- and trying- you know- and then being aspirational in where they publish'. Being aware of his attitude, he concedes that this 'is not going to work for everyone' (#16).

There is a clear division in all this thinking between an elite who achieves to retain a proper position in the academy through reliance on their skills and a slowly nurtured scholarly substance, and a less skilled mass who rushes to publication; it is a division that seems to be drawn between those who allow themselves to be impacted by POP and those who can protect themselves from its pressure. Based on this, the senior scholar says to provide explicit advice to his doctoral students:

> I recommend them to publish a really broad- exciting- ambitious article as early as they can- which has the advantage of staking out the territory […] I mean you know- showing- highlighting them- their most interesting and exciting findings. And- but I don't think you need to publish lots of articles- I think you do one or two of those in the course of your PhD- you are ahead of the game. (#16)

Such guidance *seems* to be consistent with the idea of avoiding the narrative, of actively shutting out its social pressure. Refusing to reproduce this narrative and, as a result, feeling less pressured to engage in publishing for formal authorship might become a possibility among some early career scholars if they receive such guidance. Yet, it also poses the risk of reproducing an elitism through the performance of scholarly communication: it allows a degree of freedom that is impossible to attain for a mass of individuals in the first place, but subscribes to the basic principles of how communication has to be performed formally.

Discussion: Publish or Perish and the Slippery Slope

Peer pressure as a force vis-à-vis material requirements on job markets or grant applications exists. POP appears here in the form of a simplified narrative that enables early career scholars to funnel their aspirations into a plannable path towards the future. The evidence presented highlights the significance of personal conversations in everyday situations as well as mentorship, to both confront and reinforce a narrative that always relates to the same set of ideals, either for dismissing its logic or for reproducing it. This narrative of POP is essentially romantic since there is a hero who overcomes adversity (Smith 2005; cf. Frye 1976). This well aligns with often-heard arguments about the passionate, work-absorbed humanities scholar who *lives for their books*.[15] Deep rooted cultural ideals that are particular to the humanities—qualitative judgement, deliberation, deep engagement with argument, scholarship as an end in itself—become incorporated in this narrative in opposition or temporal distance. Work in the humanities is much less the application of techniques in lab settings and of publicising directional, exploitable information; humanities scholarship is, much rather, a critical competence, driven by deliberation, hermeneutic subjectivity, and an openness to argument, welcoming discursive recursion. The humanities exist by always falling back on themselves, questioning their traditions, and employing these critically re-examined roots to assess contemporary thought (Dilthey 1922; Habermas 2011). The early career stage is a temporally agonal state of scholarly identity formation that, as such ideals suggest, can hardly be mitigated by non-scholarly work.

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[15] Most recently prominently reflected in Germany with the debate over #ichbinhannah (Bahr et al. 2022).

The narrative of POP repositions this agon of early career scholarship. It claims that there is a solution, next to, or in ambiguous company with, a focus on scholarship alone. In the larger conflict of philistine management—with its effective evaluation practices and manageable incentive structures—and a somewhat stubborn, reclusive scholarship, POP claims that the manageable path is preferable. It is this shift towards effective manageability, without effectively reducing uncertainty, that former studies similarly highlight (Nästesjö 2021; Rowlands and Wright 2021). To be sure, there is a great variety in how different actors react to such uncertainties; both my interviews and other works show this (Knights and Clarke 2014). Moreover, research on imagined futures and their unknowability confirm how actors try to navigate future outcomes in relation to narrative constructions (Aspers 2018; Beckert 2016). Both the meaning woven into such narratives and the ways in which individual constructions coalesce into unified narratives within communities reinforce their potency.

This narrative demands instrumentalising publishing and, by providing a simple, formal rationalistic logic, it appears to provide a solution to uncertain futures. The notion of a rationalistic logic lets us think of Weber. His iron cage—the constant increase of rationalisation and subordination of individuals to it (Weber 2001)—can be read as a development of an alienated condition. POP indeed represents this, an alienated condition in the sense of a *relation of relationlessness* (Jaeggi 2016). It means engaging in action for the sake of something else: publishing for the sake of counting and formal representation, not of purposeful scholarly communication. Alienation means distracting scholarship from internal ideals, detaching it from an idealised substantive meaning. And because of this hollowness, the next publication is never enough. So even if I perform an ideal now and be recognised for it with authorship today, tomorrow I will have to seek performance anew. The pressure expressed by early career scholars marks this, and it is likewise visible in the literature. It means surpassing an average, in principle, but not just for once. Quite the contrary, it means not standing still: '[w]hatever the activity is, it must, we are constantly told, improve at a certain rate' (Collini 2012).[16]

The sociological conception that captures this empirical reality is the *slippery slope* (2005, 2019); the *feeling* of having to do ever more only to stably retain the current position. Where an aspiring scholar is constantly in conversation about being measured bibliographically, about having to apply for funding for pre-emptively defined new explorations, or constantly having to perform in a frantic dash to yield formal authorship, the scholarly existence is characterised by this *slippery slope*. It is a path for which the narrative studied here provides the walkable, seemingly stable way. But by so doing, it makes the actual slope even more slippery.

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[16] Witness also further work on time and experienced pressure in contemporary academia (Berg and Seeber 2016; Vostal 2016).

The narrative's clear path into a future reduces anxiety for a time, creating the impression of progress and achievable stability. It allows to infer that this slope might not be as slippery if the formal terms of competition are being followed, or if a mass of scholars is being pushed to the sidelines. It mandates a consent to the rightfulness of formal authorship, even though an aspiring scholar might not actually be willing to consent. The interviews show that, if triggered, aspiring scholars are well aware of an illegitimacy of *assumed* or *actually existing* evaluation practices that can be detrimental to conducting better, long-term focussed scholarship that does not lend itself to quick formal performativity. But such a rational assessment does not necessarily prevent them from feeling the pressure exerted by this conflict. Nevertheless, an elitist version that claims you only need to publish in the most prestigious journals to win in the game might only funnel the pressure rather than reduce it.

Rosa refers to the *uncontrollability* of the future in terms of a *non-assimilable*, *inaccessible*, and *contradictory* condition, and the way this is reduced by easy, seemingly rationalistic solutionism—a solution that is none (Rosa 2019). POP exemplifies this abstract theory in praxis. The narrative presents an apparent solution in that it claims to provide a rational, meaningful way forward. It appears to reduce uncertainty and to enable more control of an imagined future. But it is not necessarily true. On the one hand, this apparently clear path is by no means a secure way to professorship; the senior scholars who give contradictory advice (of publishing less) might be the ones on future job committees judging ruthlessly on the CVs. On the other hand, POP recursively also induces anxiety; this is the alienated condition that describes how a scholar is driven by the goal of publishing and becomes stressed because no number of publications is ever enough. Standing on the slippery slope means following what seems most rational, even though this might not be as cogent as it seems. A culture thriving on a narrative such as POP only increases structural irrationality.

Conclusion: Emphasising Everyday Action

My aim with this article was to draw attention to the narrative foundation of POP. It highlights how POP can be understood as a narrative that maps out a manageable path to an academic career for early career scholars. The emphasis on this narrative construction of POP should not lead to the assumption that material requirements do or do not themselves exist; this cannot be ascertained through cultural analysis. POP exists to make sense of those material requirements that *are* available. CVs, job ads, grant assessment exercises, research policies: they are all mediated by the symbolically patterned background knowledge within which narratives are prominent resources. But by adding symbolic meaning disproportionately, it reinforces a detrimental logic. POP ignores the reality that other approaches are also feasible. In short, it ignores the fact that it is perfectly possible not to submit ten publications for a funding application—even if the application guidelines say you should only submit the ten most important ones.

Employing resonance theory to understand the empirical reality of this narrative further helps seeing the self-reinforcement of this narrative; it provides an easy solution that reinforces the problem. Avoiding this narrative among peers and receiving affirmation from mentors *can* help to disrupt this harmful logic; but it might also simply push the narrative to an elitist version where scholarly ideals of a community of dissensus (Readings 1999) are not an end, but a means only. Being a critical theorist, Rosa's conception of resonance is pertinent in this respect as it demands to consider uncertainty and uncontrollability not as states that need to be overcome by false solutionism. Much rather, a scholarly fertile culture needs to be fostered that can absorb and alleviate uncertainty—the fertile ground for false solutionism—while also embracing that the future inevitably remains uncontrollable. Dissensus means that the formal fact of authorship alone does not suffice—and mentorship needs to communicate precisely this. Being in resonant relation with the scholarly world is a procedural state that requires constant work within the dialectic of progress and uncontrollability. Considering that material requirements are often not given in terms of publication numbers, the way in which such evaluations are presented is an appropriate place to consider changes in this regard: by funding bodies, research management staff, or even within supervisory conversations. If it is indeed not quantity but quality that counts in evaluation practices, then the search for and formation of a scholarly identity should also be at the centre of the presentation and communication of evaluations; in other words, if evaluations conform to scholarly ideals, this should be reflected in the way research management or application sites account for them. Strengthening a narrative that better aligns scholarly ideals with early career stages seems possible if the literature of evaluation research is correct in identifying no significant harm within evaluation criteria.

Moreover, there is a strong discourse on regaining better means of the recognition of scientific work in the wake of the open science movement. How work is evaluated and how the productivity of scientists is to be judged should not be a matter of quantification and of taking journal metrics as easy truths; this is normatively spearheaded by such statements as the *Leiden Manifesto* or the *San Francisco Declaration of Research Assessment* (DORA 2012; Hicks et al. 2015). There are two issues with this. On the one hand, such larger manifestos and institutional appeals to them are of no value if it does not reach everyday actions.[17] These manifestos are bound to fail (Curry 2018) if senior academic staff does not actually incorporate their norms in application and promotion procedures, and if early career scholars are not even introduced to such principled content. On the other hand, such manifestos appear to be largely concerned with the sciences; even though they are not necessarily written in this way, they are driven by the open science movement and, thus, address *scientific* audiences much more than others. Considering that the humanities still lack behind in finding their own, integrated discourse on what a future of *open humanities* may mean (Knöchelmann 2019), it is questionable how (and if) the humanities achieve to formulate such a manifesto on their own.

This opens potential for future research on questions such as: how would a comparable manifesto that provides a counterexample to POP look like in the humanities? How can senior scholars be made more accountable in their mentorship practices? What would need to change in the assessment of a scholar—or the presentation thereof—so that those early in the career feel secure to not rush to publication? Of course, none such work on the cultural narrative should exclude an improvement in the material structures of early careers; but it might reduce some of the anxiety and frantic dash to publication.

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[17] This can similarly be studied in the work of editors and their decision making (Knöchelmann 2023b).

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