Editorial: in praise of slow science

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The launch of Chat GPT, and a whole array of novel academic tools, has just been the most recent development in the academic rat race, where everyone is expected to publish more and faster, where academics themselves have started referring to productivity, where administrators talk of KPIs as if we were working in a corporation. The very meaning of "converging regions" in the European Research Area, refers to countries that do not produce as much as other EU countries.

Our question here would be how many of us have stopped for a second to reflect on the need to publish not more articles, not faster, but simply better quality. Under the current system, we almost force ourselves to admire academics that can publish more articles than we do, that can bang out a paper in a "good journal" relatively quickly. Academic prestige therefore starts to be based not on the quality of the article but on where it is published. In line with Polese (2018), academic prestige is defined as the percentage of people who assume an article is of high quality without reading it, relying instead on the prestige of the journal in which it is published. In a similar fashion, top journals are defined by their impact factor, which in turn is defined by the number of citations a journal receives. Now, citations can be artificially boosted, as widely demonstrated in the field. Authorship can also be artificially increased by adding ghost authors or, as in a recent case of retraction, replacing 100% of the original authors with new ones who have possibly never even read the paper they are authoring.

Adding unrelated authors and arranging cross-journal and cross-author citations were misdeeds when we started in academia. With the entry of AI, such strategies sound like kids cheating at monopoly. The stakes just got higher. Author X was recently prized as the most cited Russian author, which would be a normal thing were it not that his career was and still is based on an AI paper-mill production of dozens of articles under the statistical assumption that even if 5% of the submitted articles pass peer review, this means 50 out of the 1000 submitted. The second part of the strategy is the sale of co-authorship on the black academic market to authors trying to boost their profile or simply desperate to get a Scopus-indexed article or risk losing their job.

It is argued that the social sciences have not yet reached the full cheating potential of other disciplines. This is also because there is not the same economic interests in the social sciences. We can produce management models and propose social innovations, but we do not commercialise drugs that can be sold to 8 billion people, we do not contribute to the production of smart screens or life-saving devices. We do actually save lives, but slowly, in the long term. Changing attitudes, social behaviours, improving the human condition, supporting social mobility models – these do not make the headlines in the papers for saving someone suffering from a deadly disease. If properly applied, they will contribute to better social or economic policies, and therefore increase life expectancy, reduce crime rates and contribute to a more just management of our societies. But this is less visible than a new invention, a wonder drug or even the construction of new buildings.

So we often face the question of whether the humanities and social sciences (or at least some of them) are really necessary, and that we could just as well live without them. But this also means lower expectations in terms of academic production. Still, we recognise that some colleagues are engaged in the mass production of articles and engaging in salami slicing – dividing their dataset into very thin datasets and publishing them separately to make several articles from what is basically one solid piece.

The problem, among others, is what has been defined as the empty cockpit. The majority of people involved in this industry react to instructions, assuming that there is a logic behind this or that rule. And if there were not? If each rule is an ad-hoc reaction to a problem that emerged and that we are trying to solve, here and now, without looking at the bigger picture? In French there is a saying – "hell is paved with good intentions" – the perfect synthesis of "seeing like a state" as

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mentioned by Scott (1998), who highlighted how projects with the best intentions and aiming at the improvement of the human condition have prompted huge disasters or at least blatantly failed for lack of reckoning with the larger context.

Think of a classic situation: a country has an obsolete science evaluation system and wants to modernise and align with the best practice. This is done usually by the ministry of science or education, usually by civil servants the majority of whom have little experience of the academic environment and are tasked with the goal of making science results measurable. What better serves this goal than numbers, figures, metrics? How else can we manage? If I am in charge of evaluating science but do not understand all the scientific nuances, I would ask "what are the more successful countries doing in this respect?" and I would see that they produce many articles in Scopus journals. I would then give the order to do the same also in my country. However, with little or no guidance about what this *Scopus* is, I will be prompting something I do not understand to people who have never been introduced to it. Furthermore, I need to set the standards for academic productivity, and who would be brave enough to say in the 21st century, that "yes, one article every year is enough"? So we reach paradoxical levels expecting that PhD students are already co-authoring an article during their first year or that post-doc needs 4–5 articles per year to be considered worth their scholarship. If you are a member of a lab, it is still possible to be added as the last author to a publication, but if you are in anthropology or sociology and do not have a super-active supervisor who involves you in every article, how can you possibly produce, submit and get an article accepted within the first 12 months of your PhD (usually devoted to reading and coursework). Not to mention that the waiting time for publications has reached a paradoxical level. Once a colleague (editor of a major journal) mentioned such a bottleneck that from acceptance to copy-editing, authors had to wait 24 months. Basically, you submit an article in the current political climate and by the time it comes out, you are publishing a historical account since your findings are no longer novel, maybe the war you were examining has ended.

Or shall we mention the challenge of identifying reviewers for an article? We do not know what is more surprising, that under pressure to publish more (and therefore less time available) people cannot find the time to perform another underpaid task for corporations reaching 40% of profit by taking articles written by other people, asking unpaid reviewers to work for them and then publish them for a fee. Or that each of us is receiving endless review requests because our colleagues, under pressure to publish more, just submit more and more articles. It has been calculated that between 2015–2021 MDPI moved from 148 to 206 journals, and their published papers increased from 17,379 to 233,936 (and these figures refer only to published papers; figures for submitted articles are obviously much higher if we assume that rejections still happen). This means that each university must have multiplied their research staff 13 times! Or, more likely, that world researchers have been publishing 13 times more. In either case that is great news since; even in the latter case, it means they have time to perform more research, more experiments, and have more free time to write articles, or do they?

Amazingly, MDPI revenue has increased from 14,424,570 CHF to 294,291,488 CHF in 6 years. And this is only one of the academic giants. Real figures are much higher if we take into account that there are other major publishers active in the world (plus an indefinite amount of predatory publishers).

Slow is the new fast

In all this, where everyone is looking for outputs here and now, our choice has been to go in the opposite direction. We do not need more science, especially if this is obtained through salami slicing and with emphasis placed on results rather than process. We need better science, we need time to reflect, we need process. We need to take the time to think, discuss and concentrate on quality. We need time to gather data, to make mistakes, to start again since success is the by-product of many failures. We need to explain to future generations that results are important, sure, but they should not obscure quality or analysis. That AI can certainly be adopted to cross-

check or gather information, but should not replace the actual writing process, and that if you are in science and do not like the writing process, the errors, the reflections, the time you lose trying different solutions, perhaps you should consider an alternative career.

So this is our commitment to future authors – not to focus on speed but on quality. If we believe that an article has potential, we will identify reviewers. Of course, many will not have the time but we are a diamond open-access journal and we put this forward so that reviewers with a similar ideological commitment will find it more rewarding to work with us. Sure, we are not "prestigious" in bibliometric terms, but we will work with authors to help shape their writing, even if it takes more time and work hours than we would like to admit. So, if you're looking for a fast outlet or something you can flash out in the first quarter, we are probably not your target. But if you are looking for genuine feedback and commitment, if you feel you did not get enough feedback on a presentation, you need to discuss how to structure your article, how to tease out its potential and you are happy to concentrate on process, knowing that quality and results will come in the end, then we are a journal you might consider submitting to.

Our desk rejection rate is high for two reasons; first because finding reviewers is hard so we prefer to engage them for articles that we believe in. And second, once we have accepted your manuscript, we will do our best to bring it to publication. We believe that good research deserves an outlet, it is a matter of how well polished it is. In some cases, your paper may require more time, in which case it is better to just provide a strong signal. But if we believe we can support you and engage with your work, then you are welcome to work with us. We have informed the editorial board of this and those who have stayed with us agree with our philosophy and will try to help as much as they can, be this to identify a reviewer, review it themselves, or in other ways. Our target is not prestige; our target is good simple science. And we plan to have fun (academically speaking) while doing what we do.

Consequently, our current issue features four articles and three book reviews that each in their own way probe the distance between what systems promise and what people actually live.

Kristjan Kikerpill, Andra Siibak and Maris Männiste (2026) revisit the UK 2020 'A-level fiasco', where an algorithm built to deliver neutral, objective grading instead downgraded the already disadvantaged and was discursively turned into an agent in its own right. Tin Hla (2026) asks why political imprisonment grew under Myanmar's elected NLD government, and locates the answer not in a change of heart but in a constitution and a body of law that kept repression entirely legal. Arman Kassymbayev, Gulnar Nassimova and Damira Sikhimbayeva (2026) turn to Kazakhstan, where language quietly sorts speakers into the included and the distanced, leaving many Russian-speakers feeling the system is not for them. Timur Dadabaev, Manizha Rajabova, Abel Polese and Liam O'Farrell (2026) follow Tajik women to South Korea, where opportunity and exclusion coexist in a manner that is always negotiated, never simply granted.

The three book reviews also stay close to these questions of empire, power and the digital: Karol Dabrowski on *East Central Europe Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial* (Huigen & Kołodziejczyk, 2023), Brenda Kosi Andrias on Lorenzo Kamel's *History Below the Global* (2024), and Benjamin Cisagara on Meelis Kitsing's *The Political Economy of Digital Ecosystems* (2022).

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