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The word mountain

Academic life is being crushed by the weight of unwanted articles and books that the new productivity assessment systems require. Noel Malcolm proposes a reform based on agricultural "set-aside"

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NOEL MALCOLM IS A WRITER LIVING IN LONDON. HIS LATEST BOOK IS BOSNIA: A SHORT HISTORY.

What is the greatest threat to academic life today? Most university teachers asked this question will start talking about cutbacks and underspending. They are wrong. The greatest threat is overproduction. A tide of unnecessary publications is rising through our universities and libraries; it is threatening to drown real intellectual life, and nobody knows how to stop it.

This year more than 80,000 new books will be published in this country. In the US, the figure will be more than 160,000. Not all of these are academic, but academic publishing is where the rise in quantity is matched most startlingly by the decline in readers per book. The books are bought by libraries, not readers. This is even more true in the case of academic journals (the form of publishing which, thanks to its resistance to the laws of economics, succeeded in making Robert Maxwell rich). It is estimated that 200,000 academic journals are published in the English language, and that the average number of readers per article is five.

What is generating this uncontrollable flood? Two factors, I think. One is a very long term trend in academia: the increasing specialisation of research as the same fields are picked over in ever-narrowing detail. Where real research is concerned, this is no bad thing, especially in the natural sciences where it leads to a genuine accumulation of knowledge. But most of the books and articles being published today-in the humanities, at least-are not presentations of hitherto unknown facts. They are unoriginal interpretative rehashes of what is already known: go through their footnotes and you will see the same familiar citations being stirred round the bottom of the page like old bones in a much-used stock-pot.

These writings are the product of the second key factor: the pressure on academics to publish for career purposes. Gone are the days when one essential book plus one or two brilliant articles would guarantee a don's worth, or when a researcher could afford to devote seven years to an important project without publishing a thing. Today, jobs depend on publications-and not just jobs, but university department funding too,

thanks to "research assessment exercises" totting up the "productivity" of the dons. It is now common for departments to poach people with long lists of publications from elsewhere, just months before one of these exercises takes place, so that the new arrival's previous work can be added, quite spuriously, to the department's own battle honours.

Where is all this work being published? In journals catering only to tiny circles of mutually supportive specialists, who referee one another's articles, recommend them for publication, and demand that their university libraries subscribe to the journal in question. Fifty years ago, an English don who had written an article about, say, the poems of Robert Herrick would have sent it to *Essays in Criticism* or the *Review of English Studies* or the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, where it would have had to compete against other articles on a whole range of topics. Today, it would probably be published in a *Bulletin of Herrick Studies*, and read by half a dozen other Herrickologists.

I am not exaggerating when I say that this flood is eroding academic intellectual life. It has become impossible for anyone to maintain an overview of a single, even fairly narrow subject-let alone a discipline as a whole. When I began work on a PhD on Thomas Hobbes in the late 1970s, it was possible for me to keep up with almost everything new that was being published on Hobbes in Britain, the US and western Europe, while devoting most of my time to the great body of previous writing by and about him. I could also keep up with most of the important new work in a range of related fields: Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, 17th century English theology. Today, I cannot even read everything that is being published directly on Hobbes. Nor would I want to. I know, from frequent samplings, that most of these articles are saying nothing interesting. They are aimed at the extension, not of understanding, but of careers.

Again, when I started work as a history don at Cambridge in the early 1980s, there were senior colleagues who had begun their own working lives teaching almost every paper in the history syllabus, from Roman to American history. Today, few people would dare teach more than two or three papers: beyond that, keeping up with relevant new publications would be an intolerable burden. People who teach British 17th century political history would not dream of teaching British 17th century economic history.

Across the field of knowledge, Chinese walls of mutual ignorance are springing up, dividing the territory into ever narrower domains. Some may like to regard those domains as cosy private empires; but for most academics they are prisons. Either you teach the same narrow subject over and over again, and your brain is numbed by repetition; or you try to cover a wider range of specialisms, and you have no time for

anything else.

Another effect of this inundation is on the process of academic appointments. Fifty years ago, it was possible for aspiring young academics to believe that if they published one or two important articles, this would be sufficient to help ensure a worthwhile first appointment. Today, even the most brilliant of articles get lost in the flood. Every fresh-faced candidate already has a string of publications, most of which will be unknown to the selectors. The appointments committees increasingly rely on recommendations from senior colleagues in the field. Some of these may try to act as conscientious promoters of talent, but others are empire builders. The obsession with publications is in fact counterproductive: the merit of the published work is more or less unknown, while the system shifts away from meritocracy towards old-fashioned patronage.

What is to be done? Those who believe that the electronic revolution will solve all our problems should think twice. The next step, we are told, is for academic journals to abandon paper and print, and move on to the internet. With publication almost cost-free, the proliferation of unnecessary writing will run further out of control. Meanwhile, traditional publishers will know that what library budgets save on journals, they can spend on books, and the production of unnecessary monographs will surge.

The most sensible suggestion I have heard is that "research assessment exercises" should be required to consider only the three best items of work produced by the writer in the last ten years (the "best" to be nominated by the writers themselves). This would change the emphasis from quantity to quality, encouraging people to write more genuinely important works. But this measure alone might not be sufficient. Academic Stakhanovites would prefer to think that if they kept churning out articles, sooner or later they might even produce three good ones.

The Stalinist model, in which the Stakhanovites flourished, failed to develop any sensible control mechanisms, and thus collapsed. But there is another model, of almost equal craziness, which does offer a mechanism to copy. This model is the common agricultural policy (CAP), and the mechanism is "set-aside."

Under the set-aside scheme, farmers are paid for not growing crops. Why not pay academics for not writing articles? The state is already buying up the products at subvention prices and putting huge quantities of them into cold storage: it funds the university libraries, which buy the journals and stack them away unread. It is time for the academic system to mimic the agricultural one even more closely. Dons should be paid a bonus for every year in which they do not publish an article. Conversely, a rising scale of financial penalties should attach to every article or book that they produce. Pseudonym detection squads would sniff out fraudsters, like the satellites which

monitor Sicilian olive groves. This approach, combined with the "three best publications per decade" rule, would ensure that rational academics would spend less time writing and more time thinking.

As for those mountains of unread articles stored in our university libraries: does not the CAP supply the answer to this one, too? Could they not be sold off, at artificially low prices, to third world countries? With any luck they might even undercut the local production.