

REDEFINING RESEARCH EXCELLENCE: COARA'S ROLE AS A NORM ENTREPRENEUR IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

This article addresses CoARA's (Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment) implicit assuming of a norm entrepreneur role (concept rooted in the Constructivist International Relations theory), within the broader and ever-changing environment of scientific evaluation. This reconfiguration of research assessment holds the potential to facilitate the attainment of strong knowledge-based economies, while also reshaping the role of science diplomacy in projecting epistemic influence. Through an analytic assessment of the status quo, which is mostly shaped by scientometrics, and by highlighting its limitations, the article emphasizes CoARA's acquired part in the institutional and epistemic transition towards qualitative research assessment methodologies, primarily peer review – the main tool for unveiling scientific excellence. Drawing on key theoretical frameworks and programmatic documents, the study emphasizes the manner in which CoARA acts as a norm entrepreneur in advocating for reform, when placing peer review as the pillar for effective research evaluation and excellence identification. This transition highlights how the geopolitics of knowledge are shifted, considering that the competition for excellence is complemented by the attempt to redefine the rules of global scientific legitimacy.

Keywords

Research Assessment, Scientometrics, Peer Review, CoARA, Norm Entrepreneurship, Scientific Excellence, Science Diplomacy, Knowledge-Based Economy

INTRODUCTION

Although CoARA is a relatively recently enacted initiative – being inaugurated in 2022, it strives to promote qualitative research assessment, while overhauling the status-quo - primarily modelled by scientometrics, considering that its rhetoric holds the potential to positively impact the research environment. Moreover, this shift can also impact the international system by contributing to the imposition of a norm that acts as a catalyst for strong knowledge-based economies, especially within the broader context marked by the weaponization of interdependence and heightened mistrust in multilateralism. Among the four main avenues through which research assessment is typically conducted, namely: the evaluation of research outputs for publication in journals or academic publishing houses, the assessment of research proposals and projects for funding purposes, the evaluation of individual researchers and academics for career advancement, and the assessment and ranking of research institutions, CoARA places particular emphasis on the assessment of research proposals and the evaluation of individual researchers. These two branches are critical leverage points for ultimately ensuring research excellence.

In order to make room for the introduction of a new norm, the norm life cycle theory (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) argues that the present state of affairs needs to be disputed – usually through the agency of norm entrepreneurs. Hence, this paper first assesses the shortcomings of the status-quo, shaped by scientometrics, by summarizing the critiques raised by fellow researchers and drawing comparisons between quantitative and qualitative research assessment – mainly peer-review. This is especially timely considering that the academic world has been involved in efforts to address the excesses and deviations specific to scientometrics. Furthermore, this article emphasizes the way CoARA establishes its rhetoric concerning the imperative shift in research assessment, thus assuming the role of a norm entrepreneur. It can be argued that CoARA evolves into this capacity through the emphasis placed on the norm of qualitative research assessment, primarily peer review and the promotion of narrative CVs, whilst challenging the shortcomings of the current prevailing system.

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE THEORY OF NORM ENTREPRENEURS

In the International Relations' domain, the theory of norm entrepreneurs explains how certain actors succeed in advancing new norms within the international system. This theoretical framework was first enacted within the more far-reaching Constructivist IR theory, arguing that norms cannot crystalize inherently, but are strategically posited by norm entrepreneurs, namely entities seeking to address the limitations of the current situation. CoARA follows this paradigm, by crystallizing an institutional platform and advancing a framing strategy (namely The Agreement), that complement each other in order to facilitate the emergence of an environment open to the widespread adoption of qualitative research assessment. Their prospect for success is reliant upon the inherent appeal of the proposed norm, and on their ability to mobilize coalitions, ensure support and secure the integration of the advanced norm within international bodies, policies and practices. The concept of “norm entrepreneurs” remains central in the theory of norm construction. It is mandatory to acknowledge the fact that the process of norm construction is highly intricate, comprising a multitude of elements and being triggered by the actions of norm entrepreneurs – who possess the clearest understanding of how the proper conduct should be ensured. The emergence of the norm relies on how convincing norm entrepreneurs can be. They are engaged in a continuous effort to determine important international actors, primarily states to welcome innovative norms (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 895). There are two main processes to be undertaken by norm entrepreneurs to better their chances at success. Firstly, they shall be capable to underline the existence of a normative issue that is serious enough to justify the complete overthrow of the existing state of affairs and secondly, they shall be capable to provide a normative solution for that problem (Bloomfield, 2016: 322).

WHAT IS SCIENTOMETRIC EVALUATION AND WHY IS IT STILL RELEVANT?

In spite of the fact that scientometrics instruments such as the impact factor, or the h-index have been acknowledged as key indicators of scientific performance and researcher status, there is an amplifying consensus within the scientific community that the emphasis should be placed on qualitative means of evaluation in order to contribute to frontier research and the eventual expansion of knowledge. This rhetoric transition has been incited, *inter alia*, by the growing prevalence of the Matthew effect (first outlined by Robert Merton in 1968), the proliferation of fraudulent pieces of writing, along with the understanding that briefing in distinguished journals and targeting a high Hirsch index have become ends in themselves, rather than an implicit result of genuine knowledge production.

Derek J. de Solla Price, considered the founder of scientometrics, referred to this process as the “science of science”, an endeavour which implicates the exploration of various research methods in order to gain insight into the principles, laws, and processes that shape scientific knowledge (Wu et al., 2022: 4). It is important to point out from the outset that scientometric indices remain, to this day, extremely relevant and compelling, considering that they constitute the basis upon which funds are allocated, and career advancements are ensured (Teplitskiy et al., 2022: 1). Science diplomacy also positions scientific performance, still predominantly disclosed by scientometrics, as a resource for international prestige. The aforementioned indicators are largely utilized for outlining a state's reputation and epistemic prestige.

These indicators persist as key assessment tools for the evaluation of scientific journals, research groups and the efficiency and status of individual researches (Simko, 2015: 2). Wu pleads that a comprehensive grasp of the fundamental structure, meaning the manner in which citations are distributed and how they evolve, is essential for the valid evaluation of outcomes (Wu et al., 2022: 2). The impact factor engenders an illusion of exclusivity and prestige predicated on the assumption that it predicts scientific virtue. However, this assumption is not supported by empirical data or the performance of individual scientists (Brembs et al., 2013: 7).

THE DOWNSIDES AND LIMITATIONS OF SCIENTOMETRICS

Lately, there is a growing consensus within the “research on research community” that the aforementioned metrics are becoming obsolete and even counterproductive to what science actually entails. Scholars like Binswanger, Hicks, and Wawer assert that publishing no longer fulfils its basic fundamental purpose of disseminating knowledge, but becomes an end in itself (Wawer, 2019: 36). After conducting the literature review for this article, it has been established that there are more negative aspects related to solely employing the practice of scientometrics than desirable ones, a reality which calls for rapid reform.

Some recruiters request h-index values for candidates. A number of universities have introduced threshold h-index quotas and the number of articles in “high-impact” journals as indispensable criteria for promotion decisions (Hicks et al., 2015: 430). This crystallizes a conducive context for following hollow numbers. Considering that researchers’ career relies upon how much and where they publish, there is an undeniable risk that the implicit pressure will cause scholars to produce a greater number of writings of questionable quality, as indicated by Wawer (Wawer, 2019: 35). This dire reality elicits various unsound publishing schemes. Furthermore, it causes the release of virtually meaningless studies that are neither used nor cited and the repetition of experiments under slightly different conditions with the sole aim of obtaining “additional” data and even fraudulent publications that include plagiarism and fabricated results (Wawer, 2019: 36). The overproduction of unwanted papers leads to article inflation, which diminished the papers’ value, mainly because they become too fragmented. As a result of this phenomenon, good writings are buried under the massive production of papers that lack innovative and impactful content (Wawer, 2019: 37). As Gomes notes, another bias which arises from the practice of scientometrics is the inequality in science recognition, across the globe. The already established hegemony in global science steadily increase their portfolios, while less accomplished scholars fall short, regardless of the excellence of their works and findings (Gomez et al., 2022: 921). While prolific countries tend to be over-cited for their work relative to what they study, peripheral countries are increasingly under-cited (Gomez et al., 2022: 921). The existence of international inequalities has the potential to disrupt the emergence and flow of knowledge within the global scientific community (Gomez et al., 2022: 929). Another negative aspect which originates from the practice of scientometrics derives from interdisciplinary differences and refers to the significant discrepancy in the median number of citations received by papers across diverse research domains (Simko, 2015: 2). The issue of normalizing bibliometric indicators in order to account for interdisciplinary differences has already been considered in the existing literature (Panaretos and Malesios, 2009: 649). Performance measurements based on citation counts cannot be straightforwardly compared within the context of disparate research domains (Simko, 2015: 2) considering that the h-index varies by field in the following manner: life scientists top out at 200, physicists at 100 and social scientists at 20–30 (Hicks et al., 2015: 431). Panaretos and Malesios present a compelling argument against the improper use of citation metrics, as the sole criterion for evaluating research quality. Instead, they advocate for a more comprehensive approach that incorporates additional factors, such as editorial board membership, awards, invitations, and peer reviews to assess the quality of scientists, journals, and academic disciplines (Panaretos and Malesios, 2009: 639). Hence, three main perspectives on the scientometrics/peer review debate can be distinguished: those who advocate for maintaining the status quo - regarding scientometrics as a highly functional and accurate instrument; those who support the implementation of valuable elements pertaining to both spheres and those who endorse the transition towards exclusive qualitative analysis. Although the mentioned arguments have a strong basis, there has

been a recent shift in focus towards the negative effects of scientometrics and the necessity for an immediate solution, which essentially lies in qualitative means of research assessment. There is a direct link between scientometrics and the materialization of the Matthew effect. Wawer is one of the scholars who argues that one of the most prevalent side-effects to the practice of citation consists of the Matthew Effect (Wawer, 2019: 38). Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that while the “rich-get-richer” process is a significant factor in the general evolution of inequalities within networks, there is a need to understand why the mobility of papers within the citation network, driven by advancements in research, is constrained (Varga, 2022: 3). As Robert Merton famously posits, high-status works and actors tend to receive greater recognition than lower-status ones for products of comparable quality (Teplitskiy et al., 2022: 1). An examination of the experiences reported by eminent scientists reveals that this pattern of recognition, skewed in favour of the established scientist, is evident principally in two instances: in cases of collaboration and in cases of independent multiple discoveries made by scientists of distinctly different rank (Merton, 1968: 57). The matter of attaining a public identity within the sphere of science may be further weighted down by the significant rise in the number of papers written by multiple authors. This phenomenon often causes that the contributions of younger collaborators are less noteworthy, overshadowed by the reputation and achievements of their more established co-authors (Merton, 1968: 58). At the same time, more prolific authors hold the potential to bring a paper out of obscurity. However, when viewed through the lens of its implications for the communication system, the Matthew effect may, in instances of collaboration and multiple discoveries, serve to enhance the visibility of new scientific communications and communicators (Merton, 1968: 59). Under these circumstances, which is the lesser evil?

The following section will address the most ubiquitous scientometrics mechanisms, namely the h-index, introduced in 2005, the impact factor, developed by Eugene Garfield in 1963 and the journal ranking, which stems from Garfield's discovery. Hirsh introduced the h-index in part to address the issue of a small number of highly cited papers, which may not be representative of an individual's contributions if they are a co-author on many of those papers (Teplitskiy et al., 2022: 10). When referring to the second mechanism, Panaretos and Malesios, consider that it is now common practice to use the well-established impact factors as the standard measure of journal quality (Panaretos and Malesios, 2009: 650). It is erroneous to assume that common practice is an absolute indicator of the right course of action. The preceding instruments are primarily quantitative means of assessment, thus being unable to reflect a “scientist's intrinsic creativity” (Wu et al., 2022: 14). There are numerous negative ramifications of the employment of these processes. Absent reform of the scholarly publication apparatus, the motivational forces associated with intensified pressure to publish in high-ranking journals will persist in prompting scholars to exercise less caution in their assertions in an effort to market their research to top journals. Furthermore, given that journal rank informs the appointment and promotion policies of research institutions, the recent surge in misconduct may be indicative of a more pervasive issue. It is plausible that, over the past few decades, research entities worldwide have recruited and advanced scientists versed in marketing their work to top journals but lacking in equal proficiency in conducting their research. The reviewed literature in Brembs' article collectively indicates that the utilization of journal ranks is an ineffective and unscientific practice (Brembs et al., 2013: 7). This means that authors employ journal ranking as a criterion when selecting where to submit their articles. This results in the predominant submission of well-performing studies, yielding groundbreaking discoveries (with general implications) to high-ranking journals. This would not necessarily be a problem if other factors, like the pressure to publish preferably positive results in high-ranking journals had not arisen, forasmuch as it has the potential to result in a decline in moral standards and an increase in publication bias in highly cutthroat domains (Brembs et al., 2013: 4). A focus on top papers in literature consumption may result in inflexible scholarly communication, which could impede competition and impact research efficiency (Varga, 2022: 1). Hence, it can be argued that publications in high-ranking journals are more likely to be subjected to fraudulence than articles in lower-ranking journals, and also more prone to presenting findings that are less dependable (Brembs et al., 2013).

Returning to scientometrics mechanisms, the h-index is susceptible to several biases and shortcomings, such as self-citation and the already discussed Matthew effect (Gomez et al., 2022: 927). It would be erroneous to consider citations as the sole arbiter for success in science. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence suggests that they continue to exert a disproportionate influence as a metric. The number of

citations is a measure of impact. It is evident that the h-index cannot be interpreted as a direct measure of quality (Wawer, 2019: 38). The practice of self-citation, another negative ramification of scientometrics is thoroughly addressed in Bartneck and Kokkermans' article entitled "Detecting h-index manipulation through self-citation" (Bartneck and Kokkermans, 2011). They have established that authors can noticeably enhance their h-index, and potentially even other bibliometric indices, by employing a strategic approach that involves incorporating their own prior publications in their citations (Bartneck and Kokkermans, 2011: 96). Within this article, it has been concluded that the potential inflation of bibliometric indicators could be considerable, given that up to 36% of all citations are self-citations (Bartneck and Kokkermans, 2011: 86). Thus, authors can significantly inflate their h-index through self-citations. Panaretos and Malesios argue that the impact of self-citations is typically inconsequential in the h-values of researchers who have attained a level of maturity in their careers. However, it is not insignificant in the case of young researchers with limited citation outputs (Panaretos and Malesios, 2009: 654). Nevertheless, it would be beneficial to differentiate between authors who cite their previous work to elucidate the relationship with the paper in question and authors who strategically cite their own papers, even if they are not directly pertinent to the current paper. Another negative aspect disclosed is that female scientists have a lower h-index than their male counterparts (Panaretos and Malesios, 2009: 656). It can be observed that gender inequalities are pervasive in all aspects of society, even in the more cultivated and enlightened academic environment. This segment of the article discussed the adverse consequences of utilising scientometrics. In sum, among the negative implications that have resurfaced include the Matthew effect, the dominance of English-language publications, the lack of equity in science, the proliferation of low-impact papers, the fabrication of results, and fragmented research publication to boost citation numbers.

THE CHRONOLOGY OF CHALLENGING THE NORM OF SCIENTOMETRICS

In the previous subsection, the various inputs from scholars regarding the limits and drawback of scientometrics were discussed. The following segment explores the programming documents that were adopted within the global scientific environment in order to shift the assessment of research towards a more qualitative approach. Scholars have been studying how academic research success is determined for well over 50 years, but we can date the beginning of the research evaluation controversy to the 1980s, when rising research expenditures led to a significant growth of the teaching workforce. A major interest in bibliometrics, research integrity and meta-research emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Bonn and Bouter, 2021: 444). The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is a series of documents adopted by the UK in 1986, 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008. They establish a systematic way of assessing the value of research. Then, in 2014, the UK inaugurated the Research Excellence Framework, which was largely based on peer review, hence succeeding RAE. In British outlook, the process of peer review "should be the gold standard for research assessment" and "should be retained as the primary mechanism for assessing research quality" (Kenna et al., 2017: 2). The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessments, also known as The DORA Declaration (2012), The Metric Tide (2015), and the Leiden Manifesto (2015), were among the first documents to address and raise awareness on the deficiencies of the existing research assessment system (Bonn and Bouter, 2023: 444). This groundbreaking action was followed by position statements from many groups and organisations that broadened the issue to include research climate, research careers and research integrity. As a result, it is appropriate to conclude that the conversation around research assessment has gained significant traction and that significant changes are in the works (Bonn and Bouter, 2023: 444). The DORA Declaration argues that the evaluation of scientific productivity needs to be transparent and explicit, while strongly opposing the impact factor's use in individual research assessments. It also advocates for the consideration of value and impact pertaining to all research outputs. Furthermore, The Metrics Tide and the Leiden Manifesto pledge to create and adopt more accountable, just, transparent and overall, more appropriate metrics (Bonn and Bouter, 2023: 446). An important further contribution to drawing attention to the shortcomings of commonly used quantitative research metrics are the Hong Kong Principles for Assessing Researchers, adopted in 2019. Similar efforts to improve research assessments and indicators were undertaken through the Helsinki Initiative, launched in 2019, and the European Commission's Horizon 2020 Open Science Policy Platform, which encompasses expert

groups and aims to improve the current situation in research assessment. In addition, the European Commission's "Towards 2030" vision statement advocates for an upgrade of the outdated ranking methods used to assess university performance (Bonn and Bouter, 2023: 462). These programming documents were also mentioned in CoARA's Agreement on reforming research assessment (CoARA, 2022: 19) (henceforth, the Agreement) and constitute fundamental groundwork for ensuring the reform towards qualitative research assessment. It is expected that, by the end of 2027, or within 5 years from the signing, every signatory will have completed a reforming cycle. It can thus be argued that the move towards qualitative research assessment has been the result of coordinated efforts among individual scholars, institutional endeavours and their respective programming documents.

THE ROLE OF NORM ENTREPRENEURS IN THE RESEARCH ASSESSMENT REFORM

The most prevalent institutional bodies which advocate for the reform, namely CoARA and the ERC (European Research Council), implicitly also militate for the overhaul of the status quo, hence turning into norm entrepreneurs. CoARA repudiates the present context, primarily shaped by the norm of scientometrics, by emphasizing the unassailable importance of qualitative processes pertaining to research assessment. The ERC employs the qualitative research assessment promoted by CoARA for the prioritization of research excellence, the preferred norm in the detriment of the *juste retour* principle – the latter prevailing for a long time in the European research funding environment. The issue of social norms has become a pervasive topic of interest within the field of political science. Nevertheless, a number of significant inquiries persist regarding the emergence and evolution of social norms (Hoffmann, 2003: 1). The notion of norm entrepreneurs retains its fundamentality within the theoretical framework of norm construction. It is crucial to recognize the complexity of the norm construction process, which encompasses a multitude of elements. These key components are enacted by the exertions of norm entrepreneurs, who possess a keen understanding of the desired standards of conduct. The emergence of a norm is dependent upon the persuasive capacity of norm entrepreneurs. They are engaged in an ongoing endeavour to ascertain the willingness of significant international actors, predominantly states, to embrace novel norms (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 895). The status of a norm entrepreneur is applied to entities who engage in the process of advocating for normative change. Following argumentative discourse, new norms may reinforce existing norms, introduce minor alterations, or result in their complete replacement. In any case, the product resulting from the aforementioned process would invariably exhibit a set of distinctive characteristics from the previous status-quo (Bloomfield, 2016: 310). In their programmatic documents, namely CoARA's Agreement (CoARA, 2022) and ERC's update on the Evaluation of research proposal: the why and what of the ERC's recent changes (Leptin, 2024), both entities underline the necessity to overhaul current research assessment practices in order to embrace a more qualitative lens. They argue that peer review should be the central means of research evaluation, considering that it encapsulates the ability to better determine the accuracy of the results and the manner in which they contribute to the expansion of knowledge. The ERC brings together 90 peer review panels, specifically: 28 each for Starting, Consolidator and Advanced Grants, five for Synergy Grants, and one for Proof-of-Concept Grants, which gather every year to determine the final ranking of proposals submitted to their respective panels (Leptin, 2024: 11). This process of assessment constitutes a definite proof of ERC's commitment to enabling and bringing forward peer review. Given that both CoARA and the ERC advocate for a transition towards peer review as the primary qualitative metric for research assessment, which challenges the established order based on scientometrics, they can be conceptualized as norm entrepreneurs.

A COMPARISON OF SCIENTOMETRICS AND PEER REVIEW

Although scientometrics is a widely recognized research assessment method, there is an increasing accord within the scientific environment that qualitative research assessment techniques should gain more prominence. Qualitative research assessment methods are more proficient in identifying and revealing research excellence. Some scholars have concluded that the field of scientometrics is obsolete and has various shortcomings in research assessment, hence the imperative to replace it with qualitative means of assessment. It is indisputable that both scientometrics and peer review have advantages and

disadvantages. Nevertheless, the latter is more desirable for conducting research assessment, considering that it employs expert judgement when carrying out content evaluation, hence being capable of detecting errors and ensuring a contextual understanding. It is indeed a thorough and lengthy process dependent on the subjectivity of the reviewer, but it compensates for the citation bias and the improper imposition of quantity over quality, both specific to scientometrics.

It is important to also acknowledge the limitations of the peer review process. While it is a more reliable method, it still has some drawbacks. Firstly, there is no common format for peer review reports (Ruano-Ravina et al., 2023: 129). This determines a lack of homogeneity, given that all journals should preserve the quality and reproducibility of the manuscripts they publish. Some journals have guidelines for reviewers, but they tend to be vague and non-compliant to a standard format. It is widely acknowledged that there is significant heterogeneity between different reviews of the same paper, and that the differing perspectives can be challenging to reconcile. While expert-based evaluations are typically regarded as reliable, the process is time-consuming and susceptible to random factors, such as the selection of experts (Simko, 2015: 2). Undeniably, most shortcomings pertaining to peer review derive from the subjectivity of the reviewer, which is, after all, inherent to human nature. Michel Lamont refers to the concept of homophily, meaning “an appreciation for work that most resembles one’s own” (Lamont, 2009: 8) when discussing the limitations of peer review. Furthermore, it can be assumed that high heterogeneity exists in the citation process and in peer review. This is an inherently subjective process, and it is therefore difficult to ascertain the truth. It is rather surprising that no form of standardization of peer reviews has been implemented yet, especially considering that attempts to homogenize research communication and quality were made in recent years. (Ruano-Ravina et al., 2023: 129).

Despite the prevailing view among scholars that peer review is the superior method of evaluation, there are also numerous authors who advocate for the use of scientometrics and the conservation of the established paradigm. It is essential to consider the arguments presented by Abramo so as to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Undoubtedly, the process of peer review is constrained by a number of limitations. It is an inherently biased and a time-consuming process. In 2020, it was revealed that reviewers devoted over 100 million hours to peer reviews for journals exclusively, which is the estimated equivalent of over 15 thousand years. Furthermore, peer review frequently fails to adequately acknowledge the researcher’s contribution to each work. For instance, a work co-authored with numerous other individuals must be considered in a different light in the final evaluation versus a single-authored work (Abramo, 2024: 5). The time and financial constraints associated with peer-review evaluations at a certain scale hinder their timeliness. It is paramount to acknowledge that a standard national peer-review assessment process takes approximately two to three years from start to finish, which severely restricts its effectiveness for efficient research management and policymaking. In contrast, scientometric performance assessments can be updated daily if necessary and completed within a few weeks, all at a significantly lower cost (Abramo, 2024: 6).

On the other hand, the ones who argue that the current evaluation process is unreliable and obsolete, consider that the focus from metrics such as the number of publications in high-impact journals and citations, should indubitably shift (Abramo, 2024: 1). In light of the contrasting perspectives on peer review and scientometric assessment, as highlighted by CoARA, those responsible for determining research evaluation methodologies may be facing a challenging task (Abramo, 2024: 1). CoARA emphasizes the necessity to abandon inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal- and publication-based metrics, in particular the inappropriate uses of Journal Impact Factor and h-index (CoARA, 2022: 10). As Giovanni Abramo - an otherwise fervent proponent of scientometrics - notes, peer review represents the conventional and established methodology for the qualitative assessment of research. Peer review remains the sole option in specific contexts. It is essential in fields like the arts and humanities, where bibliographic repositories lack sufficient coverage to ensure a reliable quantitative evaluation of researchers and research organizations and in national research systems where a significant portion of research works is not indexed in bibliographic chronicles. Moreover, peer review is imperative in instances where recruitment and career advancement evaluations necessitate an assessment of essential aspects of research accomplishments that extend beyond mere output, while evaluative scientometrics can only serve a supporting role. (Abramo, 2024: 3). Those who advocate for impact-based assessments contend

that the scientometric approach is more valid than peer review (Abramo, 2024: 5). According to Abramo, scientometric studies lead to more accurate and cost-effective ways of evaluating research and responding to users' needs (Abramo, 2024: 6). Nevertheless, there are scholars who posit that evaluation is mostly led by the data, not by judgement - an unassailable predicament (Hicks et al., 2015: 429). Perhaps the most logical subsequent step would be to determine how to employ peer review, scientometrics, or a combination of both methodologies, in order to best favour the process of research assessment.

In her work, entitled "How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment" (Lamont, 2009) Michele Lamont asserts that research excellence is primarily identified through the process of peer review. A further significant discrepancy is that scientometricians can only evaluate indexed publications and peers are able to assess all forms of research, including both indexed and non-indexed works (Abramo, 2024: 4). Hicks mentions that reading and judging a researcher's work is far more suitable than relying on one number. When comparing large numbers of researchers, it is essential to consider more than just their publication records. An approach that examines an individual's expertise, experience, activities and influence is the best path ahead (Hicks et al., 2015: 431). Raff also asserts that when involved in committees which make funding, hiring, tenure or promotion decisions, assessments must be based on scientific content, not publication metrics (Raff, 2013: 533). All in all, the peer review process is regarded as the gold standard for the assessment of the quality of published scientific research (Ruano-Ravina et al., 2023: 130) and is far more dependable for contributing to the true essence of knowledge expansion.

COARA AS A NORM ENTREPRENEUR

CoARA's Agreement was first laid out in January 2022. More than 350 organizations from over 40 countries took part in this endeavour. The organizations depicted a wide range of positions and backgrounds, including "public and private research funders, universities, research centres, institutes and infrastructures, associations and alliances thereof, national and regional authorities, accreditation and evaluation agencies, learned societies and associations of researchers, and other relevant organizations" (CoARA – Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment). The primary instrument implemented by CoARA in order to facilitate systemic change in research assessment is the establishment of its working groups. Working Groups act as "communities of practice", which encourage collaborative learning. Furthermore, they gravitate their activity around specific topic areas and are based on a bottom-up methodology with voluntary participation from members. In this context, constituents are able to exchange expertise, benefit from each other's experience, work together to improve research evaluation, and support the implementation of member pledges (Working Groups + National Chapters – CoARA, n.d.). CoARA instituted a total of 13 working groups, each overseeing a specific area of expertise, all of which align towards the common goal of reforming research assessment.

The creation of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment was a major leap forward for the international research community in improving the assessment of academic research. CoARA was established with the aim of addressing the shortcomings and biases of traditional research assessment procedures. It is a consortium of a number of academic institutions, funding agencies and professional associations. The coalition was born out of a widespread realization that metrics such as citation counts and the journal impact factor, while helpful in certain instances, do not accurately capture the impact and quality of research. To recognize a broader range of research outputs, such as multidisciplinary work, data sharing and contributions to open science, CoARA aims to promote more inclusive and holistic metrics, originating in qualitative evaluation. The Coalition aims to develop a more equitable and efficient system by encouraging collaboration and the dissemination of best practice, which could ultimately ensure the expansion of knowledge. It is important to emphasize that CoARA intends to shift towards a very rigorous qualitative assessment process. Formally, it opposes the substitution of scientometrics' assessments for a disorganized system in which all individuals are considered exceptional and a hierarchy cannot be determined. Although CoARA is a fairly new entity within the international research realm, its discourse reiterates a prevalent idea regarding the research-on-research process, according to which the shift from scientometrics, towards qualitative research assessment is mandatory and cannot be deferred. Considering that CoARA places the peer review process at the core of research assessment measures, challenging the status quo, it can be regarded as a norm entrepreneur. Over 600 organisations, mainly

European, have joined the coalition thus far. CoARA promotes a type of research assessment that recognizes diverse outputs, practices, and activities – desiderata attained through qualitative judgement supported by the responsible use of quantitative indicators (CoARA – Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment, n.d.). The CoARA initiative has sparked reactions from scientometricians and supporters alike. Torres-Salinas, Arroyo-Machado and Robinson-Garcia were unequivocal in their criticism, linking the initiative to “scientometric denialism”. This prompted a robust response from voices that acknowledge the benefits of quantitative metrics, such as Ioannidis and Maniadis (Abramo, 2024: 1). Scientometrics measure scholarly impact through citation analysis (Abramo, 2024: 3). CoARA argues that its vision is clear: the assessment of research, researchers and research organizations must integrate diverse outputs, practices and activities that maximize the quality and impact of research. This requires a primary focus on qualitative judgement, with peer review at its core, and the responsible use of quantitative indicators. This is fundamental for: deciding on whom to recruit, promote or reward, selecting which research proposals to fund, and identifying research units and organizations to support. CoARA wants to drive systemic reform based on common principles within an agreed timeframe. Transfer of expertise and mutual learning will be facilitated (CoARA, 2022: 2). The CoARA position relies on peers for assessment, while GA leans towards evaluative scientometricians (Abramo, 2024: 4). Another key area of consideration for CoARA is a commitment to promoting gender equality, fostering equal opportunities and ensuring inclusiveness. It is essential to strive for a balanced gender representation and regard diversity and inclusivity in a far-reaching manner (CoARA, 2022: 4). Reform must be flexible and adapted by research organizations to acknowledge the diversity of disciplines, the variety of competency areas and talents, the differences between cultures, countries and regions, the diversity of languages used in the communication of research, the diversity of research maturity levels, the assortment of research organizations and their missions, as well as the differences between career stages, ranging from early career to senior (CoARA, 2022: 14).

The metaphor of the “black box” introduced by Bruno Latour in 1987 facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between “normal science” and “revolutionary science” from the standpoint of scientific products. Those engaged in normal science assume the veracity of existing claims in order to develop further assumptions. Scientific revolutions occur when the next generation of scholars attempts to open the “black box” of sealed claims and challenge them with new ideas or conflicting evidence (Wu et al., 2022: 10). This process and the attainment of scientific excellence is rather facilitated by qualitative research evaluation. Researchers make valuable contributions to science and for the benefit of society. These contributions include diverse outputs beyond journal publications and irrespective of the language in which they are communicated. Practices that contribute to robustness, openness, transparency, and the inclusiveness of research and the research process include peer review, teamwork and collaboration (CoARA, 2022: 5). It is clear that assessment processes relying predominantly on journal- and publication-based metrics result in a “publish or perish” culture that falls short of recognizing diverse approaches and could come at the expense of quality. This dominance can: promote quantity and speed at the expense of quality. These processes lead to poor quality and lack of rigor. They result in the emergence of predatory journals and conferences. They encourage publishing in paywalled journals because of their high impact factors, despite the availability of open access alternatives. They lead to risk aversion because taking risks may reduce the chances of publication. They generate excessive attention to rankings that hinders collaboration. They waste efforts, time and resources through the duplication of work as “negative” findings go largely unreported. Research assessment practices must induce a research culture that recognizes collaboration, openness, and engagement with society, and that provides opportunities for multiple talents (CoARA, 2022: 12). Brembs argues that almost anything is superior to what is happening at the moment (Brembs et al., 2013: 8) – reality predominantly shaped by scientometrics.

Given these considerations, peer review should be at the centre of evaluation methodologies, with a largely qualitative approach to the assessment of fundamental research. One can employ quantitative metrics, but only in appropriate situations. These can be used, for example, to evaluate students, citations, money, and publications. Qualitative indicators should be used for qualitative matters like excellence, quality, value, and effect. At no time is appropriate to employ quantitative indicators for qualitative issues. It can thus be concluded that CoARA embraces the role of a norm entrepreneur by first challenging the existing state of affairs, while also forging a favourable context for the proliferation of qualitative research

assessment methods. CoARA emphasizes the limitations of the current circumstances and takes responsible action for the shift towards research excellence.

ERC'S ADHERENCE TO COARA'S PRINCIPLES

Although ERC represents a research funding body, while CoARA focuses on the overhaul of research assessment, it can be argued that there is a consensus between the two entities regarding the need to shift from the norm of scientometrics towards qualitative assessment processes. The most conspicuous proof is ERC's signing of the Agreement. In the words of Daniel Sarewitz: "Nothing will erode public trust more than a creeping awareness that scientists are unable to live up to the standards they set for themselves" (Brembs et al., 2013: 7). ERC's mission is to stimulate the highest quality research in Europe through competitive funding and to support investigator-driven frontier research in all fields, based on scientific excellence. Recently, ERC's Scientific Council has introduced changes in the evaluation procedures and evaluation forms for the 2024 calls. In July 2021, the ERC endorsed the DORA Declaration and in early 2023 it signed CoARA's Agreement. The Scientific Council shares the concern that current research assessment systems often use inappropriate and narrow methods to assess the quality, performance and impact of research and researchers (Leptin, 2024: 1). In the document entitled: "Evaluation of Research Proposals: The why and what of the ERC's recent changes" it is highlighted that submissions will continue to be evaluated on the sole criterion of scientific excellence: the panels will primarily assess the pioneering nature, ambition and feasibility of the research project. At the same time, panels will assess the intellectual capacity and creativity of the proposer, focusing on the extent to which the proposer has the necessary scientific expertise and capacity to carry out the project successfully (Leptin, 2024: 3). The ERC, as a funding body for frontier research, should maintain the sole criterion of scientific excellence, as legally enshrined in the acts establishing the EU Research and Innovation Framework Programme, and should not move towards the evaluation of economic or societal impact. The employment of evaluation criteria such as economic impact or societal-related repercussions would discriminate against fundamental, curiosity-driven research that may not have an immediate or obvious economic or societal impact but is nevertheless important for scientific progress (Leptin, 2024: 4). The joint ratification of the DORA Declaration by the ERC and CoARA is a noteworthy measure illustrating the institutional alignment between the two entities. Although the DORA Declaration was first formulated and adopted by a confined circle of scientists and evaluators, it has now grown into an agreement with many signatories from a wide range of actors committed to contributing to the transformation of research evaluation (Bonn and Bouter, 2023: 462).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper outlined the limitations and shortcomings of scientometrics, highlighting the main reasoning for opposing this methodology and transitioning towards qualitative research assessment – primarily peer review. By comparing quantitative and qualitative study evaluation techniques, it was possible to determine the manner in which the latter is more conducive to fostering scientific excellence. Norm entrepreneurs, such as CoARA, have been positioned as agents of change in the transition from the scientometrics-dominated landscape, advocating for peer review as the most suitable method for evaluating, identifying and recognizing research excellence. All things considered, the field of scientometrics is beset with numerous negative repercussions, including the proliferation of low-impact papers, the replication of experiments, plagiarism, fabricated results, inequalities in science across the globe, discriminatory interdisciplinary differences, the Matthew effect which further causes the issues of multiple authorship, lack of young researchers' recognition, and the pronounced dominance of English language publications. It further contributes to undermining of the very essence of scientific inquiry, by placing quantity over quality. After conducting a comparison between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research assessment, the balance appears to tilt in favour of the former, especially when following the desideratum of attaining scientific excellence. In this extensive debate, CoARA becomes a norm entrepreneur, by promoting a well-calibrated transition towards qualitative research assessment, primarily conducted by peer review, while also challenging the status quo, defined by scientometrics. Along with the implications pertaining to research governance, the transition towards predominantly

qualitative research assessment also possesses a degree of undeniable relevance for Science Diplomacy, considering that impacts how scientific legitimacy, cognitive agency and international scientific cooperation are established and endorsed at the international level. This endeavour is highly valuable considering that it facilitates knowledge production within an international system that continues to place significant emphasis on the pursuit of strong knowledge-based economies.

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The author discloses that the theoretical framing of this article draws on material from her 2018 bachelor's thesis (Babeş-Bolyai University), in line with COPE guidance on text recycling. No other potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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