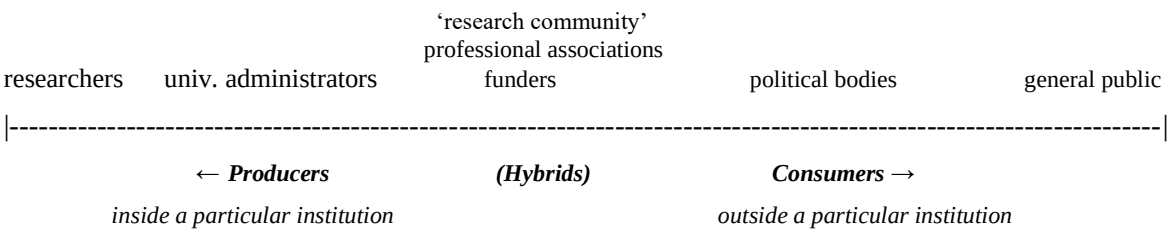
Who Judges Quality in Academe?

One way to approach the judgment of quality in academe, specifically in the humanities and social sciences, is to examine those who make such judgments and what is important to them. The complications of the nature of the quality being examined (e.g., *what* is regarded as quality) is less important here than is the purpose of making that judgment (e.g., *why* it is regarded as important and by *whom*) and the manner in which the judgment is made (e.g., *how* the judgment of quality is arrived at). A member of the general public will very likely have a different purpose for making a quality judgment (such as: 'will my daughter receive a good education in this study program?') than will an academic peer socialized into the norms of a particular discipline who believes that how a judgment is made (say, through peer review or with recourse to a list of criteria) matters. What matters is not only the output itself (a program of study established at a university or a manuscript being considered for publication) but also an assessment of its 'quality.'

The contrast is between outsider (often explicit) views and insider (often tacit) knowledge – though even that may put it too starkly. Some of what outsiders believe is tacit knowledge (for example, about an institution's reputation), some of what insiders know is explicit (for example, the formal process used in evaluating an application). Still, one can suggest there is a spectrum that runs from those who *produce* within an institution (publishing or otherwise generating insights) and those who *consume* those products (processing or using what is published or generated). Between these two poles stand those who provide organizational *frameworks*, including university administrators, outside funding agencies, professional associations (e.g., as a proxy for 'the research community') and political bodies. They provide contexts and milieus (financial, social, intellectual), and may also serve gate-keeping functions. One can imagine this continuum as follows:



Outsiders

Outside consumers include those in the public who attend public lectures given, or read newspaper articles written, by humanities professors at a local university; at least in the German-speaking context, they may harbor lingering notions of *Bildung*. Such outside consumers include political bodies with legal responsibility or financial obligations for academic institutions. They are placed a little more toward the producer side, since without their support (the 'framework conditions'), one does not have the public production of knowledge in the humanities. One can have private production of knowledge (by modern *Privatgelehrte*, the private or 'independent' scholar), so one should add some modifier such as 'mass' or 'widely disseminated' to this notion of the public production of knowledge.

By definition, outsiders will have interests different from, or even opposed to, those of insiders. Those who make political decisions about allocating funding to university institutions must take a wider view, since every allocation directed to them is an amount (or a resource) not directed to other public purposes. While a political body may well have a legal or constitutional obligation to support educational institutions, the political reality is that there are countervailing pressures that fiscal support be provided to other recipients or institutions that are regarded as just as deserving.

Because of such competing claims on the budget (or the existence of arguments that allocations to universities not be increased), political bodies need to have positive reasons for providing support, such as a visible 'payoff' or a direct benefit, in order to argue that the investment has been 'worthwhile' or that 'value for money' is being received. This is far more difficult to provide for humanities and social science disciplines than for natural sciences, as the latter are in a better position to generate patents, create products with potential commercial applications, or do research that can be applied to solve technical problems (though fields which emphasize the 'law-like regularities' natural science seeks out, including economics and psychology, have a somewhat easier time in making a similar case for the utility of their disciplines). Political bodies could be less specific and allow institutions to make such choices themselves, but the urge to micromanage is strong, and if the public demands accounting (or accountability), in an effort to ensure their tax monies going to universities and into research are not being 'wasted,' it becomes difficult to give universities *carte blanche*. Nevertheless, the interest here is general: outsiders are consumers who want to profit from what is forthcoming from research, and their interest is in *what* is being produced

– not *how* or even in some respects *why* – and would prefer that it be something that can be judged as 'good.'

Insiders

Insider producers work within specific research traditions, and beyond whatever their individual career issues (standing/prestige, influence, income) might be, their shared interest focuses on the 'role' their discipline plays in the wider academic enterprise. In that sense, they pursue and defend a certain identity both intellectually and institutionally, one distinct from the identity of others engaged in similar academic enterprises. The research traditions result in an anthropologist not being a historian any more than an art historian is a specialist in Ancient Greek, though that centripetal tendency is countered by a centrifugal tendency (generated either inside or outside academe) that leads to overlap and intersection, both thematic and institutionally, between disciplines.

One of the many issues surrounding judgments of quality in fact turns on the question of who should 'properly' be regarded as a peer. Is it only those in one's own particular specialized area, those in the discipline as a whole, or does it include those in neighboring disciplines as well? In what sense is a fellow academic in the same institution but in a different faculty one's peer? Once disciplines began to differentiate – 18th century British political economy becoming the separate study of politics and of economics by the 20th century, for example – the tendency has been to restrict peer judgment to those who have subject-area competence, or in other words restricted to those within the same discipline. Yet the current push toward interdisciplinarity forces together those who speak quite different disciplinary languages, which means a peer increasingly is a 'fellow academic' rather than just a 'colleague in the discipline.' The implication is that standards of quality or peer judgment becomes broader and less discipline-specific.

The reason these distinctions matter is that research production takes place in the context of particular research communities that can be thought of as a series of different – and at times moderately invisible and even competing – villages. A teacher/mentor who has helped a graduate student be accepted into the profession has made a decision as to the quality of the work, hence has a historical context for judging quality, if not even particular reasons for wanting to promote his or her students' work or career. Colleagues in the same department, by contrast, who are typically specialists in other branches of a given discipline, are often not in a position to speak to a particular specialist emphasis of their departmental

colleagues, even though they can speak to general norms of the profession or to larger criteria of scholarship. This is even more true of those in different disciplines on the same faculty, who may be well-informed about certain aspects (for example, if they work on the same historical epoch), but are unable to comment on the discipline itself.

Beyond these layers lies the 'research community,' composed of those who are in the same discipline in other institutions. In their capacity as reviewers, they can serve as gatekeepers (such as for the dissemination of what is produced via publication, conferences, grants), and they may also help articulate the "standards of the profession" through professional associations. Seen negatively, that community imposes a certain 'professional' conformity, and it is one of the ironies of an era that tends to fetishize 'innovation' that the system of review mitigates against recognizing it. Members of this 'research community' have all manner of experience in conducting reviews, as well as motivations, and may not speak with one voice. Seen positively, when there are a clear set of standards provided before a review, and the process encourages discourse, it is possible to arrive at consensus about what constitutes 'good quality work' – an experience that many who have sat on peer review boards with open discussion between reviewers have reported, and it often comes as a pleasant surprise.

This illustrates that the nature of judging 'quality' is related both to the position of those who judge (relative to those who produce) and to the context in which peer review takes place. Not all villagers possess a positive, well-meaning attitude, whether toward others in the same village or to those who reside in neighboring villages, and not all are wholly critical all the time. The result is that intersubjective consensus, even in a particular sub-discipline, of what 'good quality work' consists in may not be as great as one might hope – and that so much has been published, and in so many different areas, means recourse to canonical, seminal works felt to embody 'good quality work' is no longer simple, if it ever was...

One result, however, has been a subtle shift away from canonical standards to the (economics or business-driven) question: does the book, article, or grant proposal *add value*? Not only does such an assessment depend on the judger's range of knowledge, but the question can readily be abused. A mentor wishing to promote a favorite student's career may more readily say "yes" than might a senior colleague in the discipline who feels there is nothing new under the sun. Increasing disciplinary specialization also makes consensus hard to reach about what genuinely is a 'creative' or 'original' contribution to a field. That many articles and books are rarely or never cited suggests there are many reasons for publication that are tangential to their 'quality.' One can suggest the sheer volume of publication

nowadays even *subtracts* from the reputation of disciplines, as it merely means increasing pressure to publish. If greater volume does not mean greater insight, one implication is that less ought to be published – or that insightfulness be assessed in other ways, such as by tracking/examining the *iterations* in the publication process rather than merely the final output.

At some distance from the direct producers stand those who oversee the institutions. Systems of internal recruitment may try to ensure that some of these administrative positions are filled by faculty members of an institution (which can mean a loss to scholarship), but some administrators (particularly in areas like financial controlling) come from without. In exercising oversight, their interest or focus may be only indirectly on the work actually being produced in a given institution and instead be a wider effort to balance continuity or maintenance of the institution against efforts to more generally improve that institution.

While this may be articulated as a concern with 'quality,' the concern with continuity and institutional identity may well mean output or productivity per se are not the only focus or even a key focus – certainly not as compared to reputation, the ability to ensure continuity (by recruiting talented students and teachers/researchers), or funding. *That* there is evidence of work being done is important, and is probably greater than *what* is being produced, since that is for disciplinary specialists to judge. Regardless of where they are in the hierarchy, what concerns academic managers is *audience*. These may be fellow administrators, or they may be the community in which the institution is located; they may be politicians or outside accreditation boards. One can suggest that academic producers think of their readership, academic managers think of the image of the institution, how that image is perceived and what might help (or hurt) it. As a result, 'quality' for administrators may be less (or perhaps as much) of a concern than productivity. If productivity itself is what matters, the result can be a mediocrity in performance that arouses the very concern for 'improving and assuring' quality. Academic managers are the first beneficiaries of the *fact* academic work is being produced, but they are not those who draw profit from the *contents* of a work itself.

Hybrids in the Middle

Between these two regions, one finds hybrids – research councils (both public and private) that provide funding, professional associations that provide conference venues and disciplinary identity, and the rather vague 'research community' – all of whom one can think

of as both producers and consumers, depending on circumstance. That is, some in this realm themselves produce work that is read by their colleagues, and they may simultaneously be 'consuming' and benefiting from the work of their colleagues. At the same time, they serve a turnstile function, transmitting messages from insiders to outsiders and vice versa. These are not discrete groups: a research council may well rely on the recommendations of the research community, and a funder of research may call upon professional associations for advice.

The funders of research are often in a difficult position because they may not have enough internal knowledge of a discipline to be able to make independent judgments of quality. They may fall back on gross indicators (track record in obtaining outside funding, prizes and awards won for publications, etc.), or rely on the judgment of academic peers for a reading of whether a proposal warrants support. Because research funders, like politicians, have to make allocation decisions that reward some efforts and penalize (or neglect) others, there may be a tendency to treat claims of 'quality' sceptically – or to look for ready and simple measures that allow the necessary distinctions to be made.

The hybridity comes because those who occupy roles in the middle were socialized as academic insiders and yet often play public roles (as professional associations frequently do) or need to be attuned to 'outsider' political issues. A statement by the national association of historians in a particular country may be explicitly oriented to two different audiences, one composed of insiders (academic historians), the other composed of outsiders (politicians/the public). An association may also serve translation functions in both directions, trying to make clear to the members of the profession what implications a new political decision has for them, or trying to make the concerns of the profession clear to those who are in a position to allocate resources.

Discussion

Another way to look at this is to abstract it as follows:

	Nature of Quality	Reason for Judgment	Mode
	(what)	*(why)*	*(how)*
Agents *(who)*			
Insiders	process/means	professional norms	peer review
[*Hybrids*	*with – against*	*with – against*	*with – against*]
Outsiders	value added	outcomes	trade-offs

This amalgamates the individual groups suggested above, such that insiders include both researchers and administrators and outsiders both political bodies and the general public: the categories are over-simplified. The reason to do so is to draw out the contrasts – and to suggest that one reason for difficulties is that each side expects the other to do something not really in its domain. Peer reviewers, for example, may well not consider resource trade-offs when they examine the research of their colleagues, and politicians may well ignore the professional norms of a discipline.

This has interesting implications. If insiders remain wholly separated from outsiders, then one has distinct, possibly incompatible, frameworks for judgment, with outsiders concerned with valued-added outcomes and trade-offs, insiders concerned with professional norms reinforced through peer review that focus on process issues (e.g., the satisfaction of formal standards is interpreted here as 'quality'). If, as seems to currently be the case, the outsider framework is increasingly important, that comes at the cost of insider frameworks: not professional norms that dominate but outcomes, not the means used but the value added, not peer review but resource trade-offs. That changes the fundamental nature of the academic enterprise from one where quality is measured by insider to one where it is measured by outsider criteria – *which means the nature of what is understood to be 'quality' is no longer the same*. The compromise would be to find a way, as indicated by the middle line, in which the two perspectives can be combined, such that a peer review judgment of the 'quality' of an article includes judgments both of the means used (does this work accord with professional standards?) and the value added (what does the work contribute?). This works in the *what* case but ia far more difficult in the *why* and *how* cases – though there is certainly a discernable drift since professional norms are increasingly under pressure to include outcome considerations, and peer review is increasingly forced into thinking in terms of trade-offs. For better or worse, all the organizational forms noted above under 'hybrids' – the research community, the professional associations, and funders – are institutionally too weak to serve as effective mediators between insiders and outsiders.

Yet if one looks at this not in terms of judgments of quality but in terms of choices about *resource allocation*, and in that the sense about the framework conditions for producing 'quality' work, then only two actors remain relevant:

researchers	univ. administrators	'research community' professional associations funders	political bodies	general public
irrelevant	relevant	irrelevant	relevant	irrelevant

At one end, researchers themselves have essentially no power over resource allocation: they can only make application for resources to be allocated – and then only to the university administration or the funding agencies, not to political bodies. At the other end, the general public can only exercise indirect power, through existing political mechanisms, over the politicians but can do little to directly affect allocation decisions (and may have only a small interest in doing so in addition). In the middle, the research community and the professional associations are in essence on the side of the researchers, exercising little independent power. Only the funders have power over resource allocation, but not only is their overall impact usually modest, they too are subject to constraints.

The ironic result of this is that the two organizations which have power over resource allocation *both stand at some distance from, and lack much ability to, make judgments over 'quality' work*: the university administrators and the political bodies. They neither directly 'produce,' since that is what the researchers do, nor are they directly 'consuming' (or perhaps 'benefitting' would be the better term), since that is what the general public does and instead play *guardianship* roles. And guardians may well be the actors least qualified to answer the question: is it good?

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