Forums for electronic government scholars: Insights from a 2012/2013 study

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ABSTRACT

Once an academic study domain has accumulated a certain volume of domain-specific knowledge, a number of outlets emerge as preferred outlets for publication. Electronic government research (EGR) is no exception. After developing for some 15 years from its early beginnings in the late 1990s, this multi-disciplinary academic domain appears to have reached exactly this point. With an active researcher community numbering in the hundreds worldwide and a body of over 5500 peer-reviewed manuscripts and books in the English language alone, EGR has grown past its infancy into a discernible and reputable academic endeavor in its own right. While the Electronic Government Reference Library (EGRL) provides a comprehensive account of the peer-reviewed EGR literature, the preferences of publication outlets had not been studied. This study closes this gap, and it provides clues for assessing the reputation and quality of scholarly work in EGR, which is highly relevant for decisions in tenure and promotion cases.

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1. Introduction

"*Where should I publish my scholarly research?*" is the opening question in Hardgrave and Walstrom (1997) ranking of forums for MIS scholars (Hardgrave & Walstrom, 1997, p. 119). Put another way, the question could also be framed as, "Which outlets in published academic work are most renowned and most highly regarded for employing standards of excellence?" or, "What is the perceived quality of the various forums?"

In every academic domain of study these questions, or variations thereof, become burning and at times even vexing whenever scholars seek appointments, tenure, and promotion. Other domains and disciplines have long established and updated pertinent recommendations based on peer rankings and other indicators (Bharati & Tarasewich, 2002; Campbell, Goodacre, & Little, 2006; Dame & Wolinsky, 1993; Garand, 1990; Hardgrave & Walstrom, 1997; MacMillan, 1991; Olson, 2005). In Electronic Government Research (EGR), it appears that, the first study of this kind is due, since the domain has significantly grown, and tenure and promotion committees need trustworthy and

authoritative input in their decision-making processes. However, before considering a study of this kind in EGR some questions need to be addressed, such as "why does an interdisciplinary study domain like EGR need a list or even ranking of preferred outlets for publication?" or "what do we gain from domain-specific rankings?" Said differently and more provocatively, "do such rankings do more harm than good?" and "do such rankings help define, or rather limit a domain?"

Rankings have certain known deficiencies, for example, the reduction of multiple and diverse factors into a single dimension (the apples and oranges dilemma), and, hence, the problem of potentially false precision, when producing composite scores from diverse inputs. However, despite their known problems the more severely damaging effect might not lie in the rankings themselves but rather in their uninformed use and schematic interpretation.

As a case in point, publication outlet rankings in Management Information Systems (MIS) had produced an ultra-short list of two so-called "elite" journals (Dennis, Valacich, Fuller, & Schneider, 2006). For receiving tenure and promotion in the 1990s and way into the first decade of the 21st century, at many schools MIS candidates had to land one or two publications in these "elite" journals. When these demands were upheld in practice and considering the limited amount of publishing slots in these two outlets, simple arithmetic demonstrated that the discipline had made it impossible to promote a sufficient number of young academics to even compensate for retirees in that discipline, let alone grow the scholarly community — an almost classical self-defeat.

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Another side effect from rankings, which was also observable in the MIS case, is the potential limitation of scholarship to a relatively narrow interpretation of the study domain's scope, its stance, and its accepted standards of inquiry. If the top-ranked forums allow only for a narrow understanding of what is in scope and what is not, or, if the epistemological stances promoted by the top-ranked outlets tightly constrict the type and predication of contributions as well as the standards of inquiry, then a self-enforcing feedback between rankings and top-ranked outlets can indeed have limiting effects on the scholarship of a domain or field.

We hold that these pitfalls have been (and may continue to be) avoided in EGR for several reasons: (1) EGR is a multidisciplinary domain that has benefitted from the cross-fertilization among and between the researchers from various home disciplines; (2) unlike other academic disciplines, EGR has demonstrated its relevance to practice time and again, and, hence, its raison d'être is not questioned inside the academia, nor outside; (3) the editorial policies of the leading EGR outlets are pluralist with regard to epistemological stances and standards of inquiry, which is reflective of the diversity of research contributions from various fields; and (4) the understanding of senior academics involved in EGR is appreciative of the inclusive and multidisciplinary approach to studying EG-related phenomena.

Therefore, the purpose of this contribution is to determine how active EGR scholars perceive and value the publication and conference outlets (forums) in EGR. While this undertaking implicitly offers an indirect assessment of the perceived quality of EGR forums, it is also intended to provide guidance for promotion and tenure cases in EGR.

In its design this study has followed avenues similar to those taken by previous studies in other domains such as sociology (Cronin, Snyder, & Atkins, 1997), psychology (Over, 1978), or management (MacMillan, 1991; Olson, 2005) and management information systems research (Walstrom, Hardgrave, & Wilson, 1995). In particular, we replicated in part the study design and instrument introduced and used by (Hardgrave & Walstrom, 1997) study. However, beyond the need for authoritative rankings of academic forums when seeking appointment, tenure, and promotion, the ranking of publication outlets also serves other purposes such as identifying appropriate outlets for publication, studying the stream of research in a particular field, determining the direction of editorial work, shaping the identity of a study domain, and informing acquisition decisions in libraries among others (Walstrom et al., 1995).

Like other recently emerged areas of academic study EGR is a multidisciplinary endeavor and not a discipline in the traditional sense (Scholl, 2007); major contributors to EGR are scholars with a disciplinary training in the fields of Public Administration, Management Information Systems, Computer Science, Political Science, and Information Science among others. The accepted standards of inquiry vary across those fields, so do the criteria for promotion and tenure; furthermore, some fields are multi-disciplinary study domains themselves. However, no single field can claim majority ownership to EGR or even comprehensive coverage of the study domain, and with the exception of occasional special issues and workshops EGR topics have rarely been a focus in most of the major outlets of the participating disciplines (Scholl, 2007).

From the perspective of those contributing disciplines, EGR is a special topic and a niche of that disciplines' research. For EGR scholars seeking tenure and promotion in single discipline-oriented environments, for example, such as Management Information Systems, demonstrating the quality and impact of their EGR work to their promotion and personnel committees might pose a potential problem unless evidence is provided for the acceptability and equivalency of quality standards applied to EGR research, which also motivated this study.

Over the years several outlets have emerged accounting for the rapid growth of EGR (see Table 0). Around the turn of the millennium new conferences or new conference tracks rather than journals served as the main venue for presenting and publishing EGR. The North American dg.o conference (1999), the European EGOV conference (2002), and a minitrack (2001) at the Hawaii International Conference on System Science (HICSS) were among the first new and visible outlets for EGR. For quite some time conferences were more frequently used for publication than journals, and the main conferences have maintained a high appreciation among EGR scholars to this day. The first new academic journals dedicated to electronic government appeared around by the mid-first decade of the 21st century. Gradually, also previously established journals such as *Government Information Quarterly* (Elsevier) and *Information Polity* (IOS Press) began expanding their scope ever so slightly and increasing the number of published manuscripts from the emerging domain of EGR.

In 2005, the publicly accessible Electronic Government Reference Library (EGRL) (http://faculty.washington.edu/jscholl/egrl/ — accessed on 8/18/2013) was created, in which the peer-reviewed, English-language literature of the EGR domain has been recorded and semi-annually updated ever since (Scholl, 2009, 2010). The purposes of the EGRL have been "to improve the quality of e-Government (EG) research and publication…" and "to provide authors and reviewers access to the body of current academic knowledge, provide keyword searches to better inform research, and provide accuracy and reliability in citations" (http://faculty.washington.edu/jscholl/egrl/purpose.php — accessed 8/1/8/2013). The EGRL has been a unique resource for the study domain, since it represents a comprehensive account of the domain's English-language-based body of peer-reviewed academic knowledge. For this study the EGRL has served as an important point of departure and reference, providing exact quantitative information, for example, about most frequently used forums in EGR. While it might have been possible to infer and calculate the scholarly publication preferences from the number of entries in the EGRL at least in part, it was important to determine the perceived quality, academic weight, and rank order of forums as explicitly seen by the domain's scholarly community.

The manuscript is organized as follows: First, we present our research questions followed by the description of study design and methodology. Then, we present our findings for each forum group, which we discuss in the succeeding section. Finally, we present our conclusions and recommendations along with future avenues of research.

2. Research questions

2.1. Research question #1

Conferences have played and are still playing an important role in presenting and discussing current electronic government research. While quite a number of special-topic meetings and conferences have emerged, it has not been studied what relative importance and value the various conferences carry in the view of the scholarly community dedicated to EGR, which leads to

Research question RQ #1: *What is the relative value/weight/rank of the various academic conferences used for presenting electronic government research?*

2.2. Research question #2

While not identical to the value of conferences, the value of proceedings is closely related to the value of the respective conference itself. However, some conferences split up their proceedings which makes it harder to determine the perceived value of the respective proceedings. So far, it has not been studied what relative importance and value the various conference proceedings carry in the view of the scholarly community dedicated to EGR. Therefore,

Research question RQ #2: *What is the relative value/weight/rank of the various conference proceedings used for publishing electronic government research?*