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Signaling effects of scholarly profiles—the editorial teams of North American accounting association journals: A personal perspective

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ABSTRACT

The article by Endenich and Trapp entitled “Signaling Effects of Scholarly Profiles – The Editorial Teams of North American Accounting Association Journals” provides valuable evidence about why most top tier North American accounting journals, despite rhetoric to the contrary, publish a narrow range of research. Furthermore, the paper provides evidence as to one approach that might result in a substantive increase in diversity. At the same time the paper points out, once again some would say, that in part there is a strong element of social construction in determining what is considered top tier accounting research worthy of publication. As Editor (in-chief) of one of the focal journals in the key period under study in this article, I bring a personal perspective to assessing and interpreting the research. I opine on what I see as the greatest strengths and the weaknesses of the paper as well as how the evidence included in this paper may be put to good use by those supporting a more diverse set of research being published in top tier accounting journals.

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1. Introduction

How are accounting research papers chosen for publication in top tier North American based accounting journals? Why do certain types of papers, e.g., financial accounting research based on economic theory and using archival methods, seem to dominate such journals? These questions are of great interest to audiences of junior faculty and senior PhD students as demonstrated by the number of times these and similar questions are raised in “ask the editor” panels, and they are staples of the PhD consortium circuit.¹ There are many value added ways for respondents to answer those questions: from explaining the research production process; to explaining differences in the editorial review process across journals among others. [Endenich and Trapp \(2017\)](#), however, provide a different sort of response by attempting to understand factors that affect the differences in breadth of accounting research published in North American top tier accounting journals versus the set of accounting research produced and published overall by accounting academics.

¹ I have taken part in more than thirty-five such panels and doctoral consortiums over the past fifteen years in Europe, Asia, and Australia/New Zealand as well as in Canada and the USA.

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Endenich and Trapp (2017) initially focus on The Accounting Review (TAR), the oldest accounting research journal in the world (founded in 1926), and published by a member based organization, the American Accounting Association (AAA).² Besides being the oldest accounting research journal, as an association journal it is argued that TAR should publish accounting research as diverse as the interests of its members, subject to research being carried out at the highest standards of academia, broadly conceived. The authors argue, citing extensive prior research that the set of research published by TAR is narrower than that produced by the AAA membership and attempt to shed light onto the reasons why there is such narrowness in TAR.³

Endenich and Trapp (2017) first attempt this explanation via the well-trodden trail of “academic elites” (e.g. Lee, 1995) who by virtue of the university they graduated from or the university they are employed at, “control” access to top tier journals. Overall, this argument is not very compelling given the numerous confounds to its explanation nor are the empirical results documented in the paper very persuasive.⁴ This portion of the paper could be deleted without loss of content.

The second, and what I consider the main argument of the paper, is a relatively innovative signalling theory based analysis that raises substantive questions about the completeness of the explanations provided by recent Senior Editors at TAR as to why the journal has grown narrower in focus over time. In particular, Endenich and Trapp (2017) attempt to provide a critical analysis of the often made claims of Accounting Review (TAR) Senior Editors (most aggressively made first by Kachelmeier (2009a, 2010, 2011)) that TAR publishes a representative sample of accounting research that is submitted to the journal on a purposeful quality adjusted basis as determined by the review process.⁵

The TAR Senior Editors claim, and rightly so, that they can only publish research that has been submitted to the journal. They also claim that it is researcher self-selection (i.e. researchers who choose to submit their research to other accounting journals) that results in the limited range of accounting research published in TAR versus the set of research produced by accounting scholars. Endenich and Trapp (2017), while not rejecting this argument, suggest that TAR, either implicitly or explicitly, sends out signals to researchers about what topics and methods are appropriate for TAR. These signals create a perceived institutional barrier that discourages academics from sending more diverse accounting research to TAR given the lack of obvious knowledgeable editors and editorial board members to review such research.⁶ In other words, the problem is not just one of supply (i.e., researchers choosing to submit diverse accounting research to other outlets) it is also one of perceived demand (i.e., TAR does not welcome and is unable to properly assess a more diverse set of accounting research).

To examine their signalling argument the authors benchmark TAR against Contemporary Accounting Research (CAR), the journal of the Canadian Academic Accounting Association whose Senior Editors (known as Editors and Editor (in chief)) have made the strong claim that they are interested in a more diverse set of accounting research starting with the editorship of Gordon Richardson (see Salterio, 2011).⁷ Endenich and Trapp (2017) argue that CAR has explicitly undertaken activities to signal greater openness to a more representative set of accounting research and they seek to determine if these signals have resulted in a change in the journal’s set of published papers and by inference, the set of papers submitted to the journal.

Specifically, Endenich and Trapp (2017) present a detailed analysis of the Editors and Editorial Boards of The Accounting Review (TAR) and Contemporary Accounting Research (CAR) from 1990 to 2015. They examine the accounting subject matter (e.g. auditing, financial accounting etc.) and research methods (e.g. analytical, experimental etc.) used by Senior Editors, Editors and Editorial Board members (i.e., what I will call the “editorial team” for short) for the ten years preceding the year of measurement (e.g. 1980–1989 for members in 1990). They employ this analysis to determine the primary accounting subject

² Roughly one third of the AAA membership is from outside North America making it somewhat representative of the set of accounting research carried out worldwide. Hence, one could argue that the authors are making the case for the narrowness of research published in top North American journals (with the potential exception of *Contemporary Accounting Research*) versus that published in the rest of the world.

³ There is sometimes advanced a quality argument, that is, that research that is published in “mainstream” North American accounting journals is more rigorous than that published in other leading accounting journals. Those arguments tend to be based on one of three assumptions: (1) research based in economics is the most rigorous; (2) judging research by standards of one social science paradigm when the research is based in another (e.g. psychology versus sociology); and (3) that positivist research is superior to interpretivist research for all relevant accounting research purposes. As careful study shows the fallacies of each of these arguments, I shall ignore what I consider the relatively “ignorant” quality argument.

⁴ A basic assumption of the elites argument is that pre-entry to PhD program, all students are created equal. However, my observations of PhD students at all sorts of different programs suggest that students who attend more research-intensive programs at so-called “elite” universities are different from those that attend other programs. These differences include: greater personal ability and drive to succeed leading them to research PhD programs more carefully; obtain more information about what career trajectories look like; make decisions to move great distances to undertake their studies based on this analysis; be willing to relocate post PhD to universities with strong research support; and so on. In a sense this a strong self-selection, signalling based argument that accounts for why such students are more likely to have “successful” research careers. Hence, it should not be surprising that post PhD, on average, students from such schools should exhibit higher productivity and impact than those from other schools. Hence, the argument about “elite” schools should be subject to a signalling analysis rather than contentions based on a power analysis that is implicit in using the term “powerful elites.”

⁵ As the earlier drafts (Kachelmeier, 2009a, 2009b, S. Salterio personal file) show, the claim that was originally advanced is that TAR publishes a representative sample of accounting research, without that qualification of given the paper set submitted. However, several then TAR editorial board members, myself included, pointed out that if the inputs were not fully representative of accounting research then the outputs could only be representative of the set of inputs. Hence, TAR Senior Editors made adjustments to the claim and revised it to state that they publish a representative sample of what is submitted, a claim that they continue to make to the present day.

⁶ The standard response by TAR Senior Editors to this claim is that they would appoint ad hoc Editors and reviewers with a knowledge of the subject matter to review such diverse papers. More about this argument later in the commentary.

⁷ The authors also note that the North American base of CAR along with its history of being very similar to US journals in what it published (Qu et al., 2009) makes CAR an appropriate benchmark given the differences in enunciated strategies between the two journals in the post 2000 time period.

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