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Pleased to cite you: the social side of citations

Research Trends Editorial Board

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The value of bibliometric measures



Pleased to cite you: the social side of citations

While social connectedness correlates with citation counts, science is still more about what you know than who you know. A recent investigation of the social and citation networks of three individual researchers concluded that while a positive correlation exists between social closeness and citation counts, these individuals nevertheless cited widely beyond their immediate social circle (1).



Charles Oppenheim

Professor Charles Oppenheim comments on the motivation for this study and its main findings: "Our research started from the hypothesis that people were more likely to cite those close to them, forming so-called 'citation clubs' of colleagues in the same department or research unit. There is an allegation that such citation clubs distort citation counts. We took as our primary

target the Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research (CIBER) group of researchers based at University College London, well known for their work in deep log analysis.

"The research was quite novel because it used social network analysis (SNA) techniques and UCINET SNA software to analyze the results from questionnaires we sent to CIBER group members and people they had cited. We found no evidence of a citation club – CIBER researchers aren't necessarily socially close to the researchers they cite. However, it must be stressed that this was a small-scale experiment and cannot be generalized to all subject areas, or indeed to anyone apart from the CIBER group."

A circle of friends and colleagues

Blaise Cronin, Dean and Rudy Professor of Information Science at Indiana University, US, and newly appointed Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, agrees that both social and intellectual connections affect citation. "We certainly don't cite authors just because they are colleagues or friends, but all things being equal, most of us would probably give the nod to those whom we know personally.

"Our colleagues, co-workers, trusted assessors and friends are often to be found nearby – in the lab, along the faculty corridor.



Blaise Cronin

Even in an age of hyper-networking, place and physical proximity play a part in determining professional ties and loyalties. And those bonds, in turn, can shape our citation practices.

"Co-citation maps do not merely depict intellectual connections between authors; inscribed in them, in invisible ink as it were, are webs of social ties. A number of bio-bibliometric studies (2) have attempted to combine sociometric and scientometric data to reveal these ties. As the digital infrastructure evolves, we may soon see the emergence of a new sub-field, bio-bibliometrics, and the first generation of socio-cognitive maps of science."

Paying an intellectual debt

Howard D. White, Professor Emeritus at the College of Information Science & Technology at Philadelphia's Drexel University, US, has been interested in the social dimension of citation for some time. His work on the social and citation structure of an interdisciplinary group established to study human development concluded that citations are driven more by intellectual than social ties (3).



Howard D. White

White explains: "There is no doubt that citation networks and social networks often overlap. Given the specialization of research fields, how could this not be the case? But no scientist or scholar would fail to cite a useful work simply because it was by a contemporary they had not met or a dead predecessor they could not have met. Citations are made to buttress intellectual points, and perceived relevance toward that end is far more important than social ties in determining who and what gets cited."

As the nascent field of bio-bibliometrics continues to grow, we will come to a better understanding of the motivations underlying the practice of citation. Yet it is already clear that, in the main, citations mark the acknowledgement of intellectual debt to those who have gone before, rather than mere whimsy: it really is all about what you know, not who you know.

References

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