Scholarly outputs: online and discoverable- not always accessible

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Academics have (largely) come to understand that their work being online is necessary. The online space provides an environment where work can be shared and read as well as being a platform through which it can reach those who need it. This first step of sharing highlights the need for the work to be discoverable - if an article is online but no-one can find it, it has not really been shared. To extend this, even if your work is online and discoverable, do you know if it is accessible?

As a part of the online presence work that we at OpenUCT have been doing with UCT academics, we had a look at the number of articles that appear in the top ten Google scholar search results when searching for the scholarly work of 16 UCT academic staff members in a variety of disciplines. This is what we found:

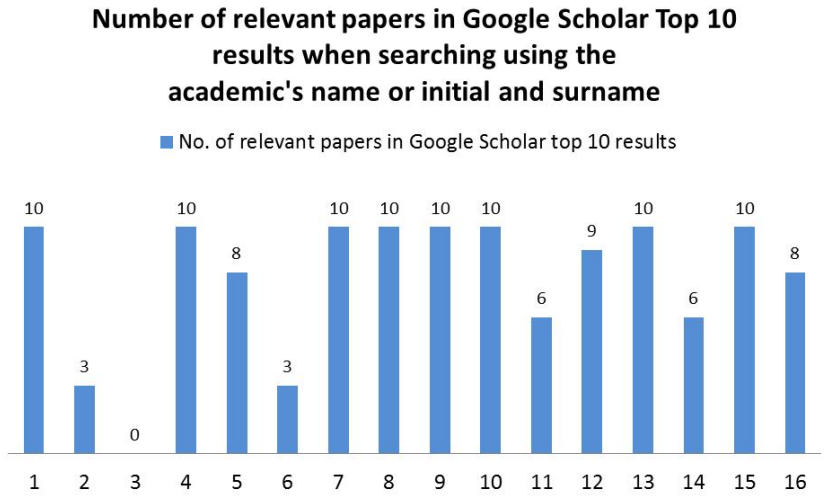

Figure 1: Graph showing the number of relevant papers in the top ten Google Scholar results for each academic

The numbers on the x-axis represent the academics (n = 16). The blue bars represent the number of relevant articles in the top ten of the Google Scholar search results.

The relevant results were those papers that are authored or co-authored by the UCT academic we searched for. The results were encouraging: we found that UCT and its academics' research is fairly visible online. However, before we started to celebrate, we looked at how many of those publications were openly accessible. A different picture emerged:

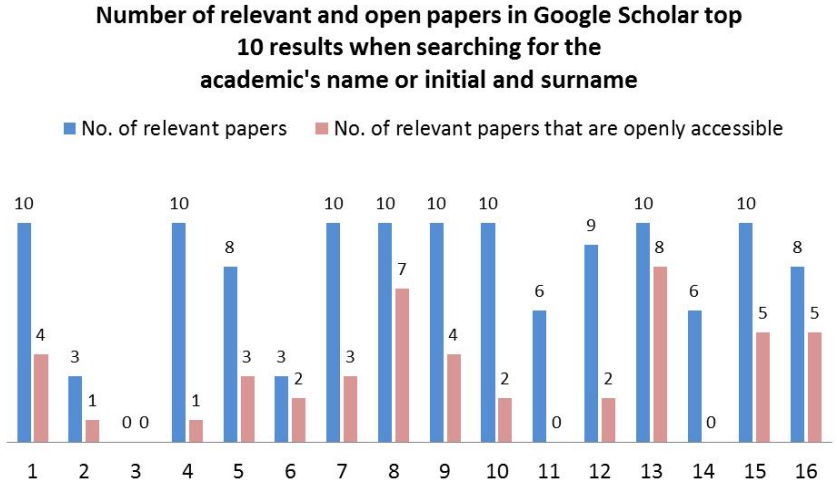

Figure 2: Graph showing the number of relevant papers in the top ten Google Scholar results for each academic and how many of these are openly available, looking at the top ten results.

The numbers on the x-axis represent the academics. The blue bars represent the number of articles in the top ten of the Google Scholar search results (avg. = 7.69). The pink bars represent those outputs that are relevant and openly available (avg. = 2.94).

As is evident from the graph, the number of relevant and open papers is considerably less than those that are relevant but possibly not accessible. This indication of the number of open outputs was obtained by accessing the relevant papers in the top ten Google Scholar results for each academic from a location off campus (i.e. on a private internet connection with no ties to the university network); this ensured we were getting an accurate reflection of how open these outputs would be to the general public. In this way we can see that there is a large difference between the number of outputs that are discoverable via Google Scholar and those that are actually accessible to those without the benefit of their institution's journal subscriptions. As we looked only at whether the full article was accessible (for viewing and/or download), the accessible articles included both gold and green open access articles and had a wide range of publication dates.

The articles that are not openly accessible are not available to NGOs, government employees (for example, doctors at state hospitals), small businesses, researchers at institutions that can't afford to subscribe, the general public… - the list of those kept out by the paywall could go on and on. By publishing in journals that restrict access to the published articles and have an embargo period on self-archiving the pre- and/or post print, academics are limiting who can immediately access, use and build on the research. This is slowing the pace at which the body of knowledge can grow, stunting innovation and costing lives. It is not necessarily the people who **can** access the articles that **need** to access the articles. We are limiting our own potential through the current publishing models adopted and accepted by many. To quote Mike Taylor **from his article in the *Guardian*** "As a scientist" (and I would add, any academic or creator of knowledge) "your job is to bring new knowledge into the world. Hiding it behind a journal's paywall is unacceptable". Something to think about when submitting your next paper or when you're debating whether you should archive that post-print.

by SarahG
Blog post

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