

## Academic journals do not constitute the entirety of relevant, rigorous material.

more “Canadian content” researchers, but the cost of such a shift would not only be lower international journal output, it would also threaten the quality of Canadian research by those of us who do it.

Second, I echo most of the concerns of the authors about data access, but my lament for the lost surveys is qualified. In my experience as an empirical researcher, to publish an empirical paper outside Canada using non-US data, one needs to have data that are superior in some dimension. We can’t just match — we have to beat to compete.

In the past, Statistics Canada surveys have often permitted us these opportunities. Looking forward, however, there is a strong global move toward administrative data, in the form of tax records, social program files and business data. These data sources are collected for administrative uses, but are also repurposed for research. The Scandinavians and others are passing us by with the availability of comprehensive, integrated administrative data. Without decisive steps taken to bolster our access to administrative data, I expect the next generation of empirical researchers will perform even worse on the Canadian content metrics. ■

*Kevin Milligan is associate professor of economics, University of British Columbia.*

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## No crisis

ANDREW LEACH

This report raises three questions for me. First, is this an issue? Second, why is this happening? And third, what if anything can be done about it? Emery, Simpson and Tapp look at each of these questions in their report, but I thought it worthwhile to add my thoughts as well.

I think the key issue is whether Canadian decision-makers and stakeholders have access to relevant, rigorous and timely analysis of key policy issues. In order for work to be relevant to Canada, it does not have to be specifically about a Canadian issue, nor does it have to be by an academic at a Canadian institution, nor does it have to be published in an academic journal. As a result, the data as presented likely underestimate the share of articles published that have relevance to Canadian policy issues, and certainly do not represent the only articles being written directly on Canadian policy issues or with Canadian data.

The reason we might want published academic work on issues is that it is generally seen to be rigorous, non-partisan, neutral and subject to peer review. These reasons are valid, at least to a point, but academic journals do

not constitute the entirety of relevant, rigorous material. There are excellent papers on key policy issues written by highly trained economists working outside the Canadian academic environment. Resources for the Future in the US, which houses some of the best resource and environmental economists, including a couple of Canadians, is one example. Canadian institutions such as the IRPP and the Mowat Centre fill that role here. As well, work by academics in Canadian institutions may be published outside of traditional peer-reviewed outlets on blogs like Worthwhile Canadian Initiative or in issue papers published by the C.D. Howe Institute or the Calgary School of Public Policy, for example.

These outlets can be both more timely and more accessible than peer-reviewed journals. To say that the share of Canadian (academic) economists’ (peer-reviewed) publications (in academic journals) that focus on Canadian policy issues is in decline is important, but it is not a sufficient condition to say that the statement without bracketed fragments holds, or that the influence of Canadian economists in general on public policy has declined.

Why is this happening? I think there are two primary causes: data issues and a general lack of economic catastrophe.

Economists are interested in explaining behaviour. To expand knowledge in empirical work in economics, you need new circumstances or better data. Offer either, and people will write about it.

When I was in graduate school, many of my colleagues were working with Norwegian data that allowed researchers to track workers’ individual career paths, health outcomes and education, among other characteristics, and to match these up with data that followed each of the firms where these workers were employed, over time. These data were unique: you could pick out the productive workers working in nonproductive environments and vice versa,

which you could not do with other data sets. These unique data meant that people who would otherwise have no knowledge of, or interest in, Norway, became scholars of the Norwegian labour market.

Unfortunately, in Canada we too often seem to do the opposite. Our data are under lock and key, not integrated, and hard to combine. I have many empirical economists as colleagues, and some are working with Canadian data. Among those who do, many have one-off data that they've often worked for years to secure through a personal contact; others work on-site at Statistics Canada, having to physically travel to their data; and some are working with data that are technically publicly available but are not easily found or compiled.

The second reason for this decline may be a general lack of economic catastrophe or interesting economic circumstances in Canada. When I first joined the faculty at HEC in Montreal, in 2003, it seemed that every person we interviewed for a macroeconomics job was working on the Asian financial crisis. Today, the same people would be working on the eurozone or the collapse of the US housing market. By comparison, Canadian economic crises have been, perhaps, less interesting. I am not suggesting that we create financial crises for the benefit of economists, but we should recognize that in some cases having fewer globally interesting issues to study might be a good thing. Economics is the dismal science, after all. When you look at the peak interest in Canadian questions in the IRPP report, it coincides with interesting questions (fiscal federalism, equalization, etc.) or new circumstances (free trade, and then NAFTA). I wonder how these data would have changed, for example, had we allowed the bank mergers in the late 1990s or had we implemented the economy-wide greenhouse gas policies outlined by Canadian governments past and present.

Finally, while there may be a bias against Canadian (or non-US) papers in the larger and more influential eco-

nomics journals, it's not insurmountable, as there are certainly many examples of papers using Canadian data published in the top-tier economics journals by Canadian academics.

There is another issue that is more worthy of note. Given Canada's small size, journals interested exclusively or predominantly in Canadian policy issues are not going to attract a lot of readership or as many citations as similar journals focusing on US issues. As a result, Canadian academics end up with limited incentive to publish in these journals, as publications generally do not contribute much to merit pay or tenure and promotion cases if the journals in which they appear are poorly ranked. Out of 322 economics journals ranked on the Journal Citation Reports, the

this may not be a bad thing. Whether it's in academic journals or other settings, economists know that people respond to incentives. Some of us will write about Canadian public policy because it's a passion, but others will not do so without reward.

So, what can we do about it, if anything? First, I think we need to assess the broader issue: are policy-makers getting access to timely, rigorous, peer-reviewed and relevant economic research? If so, then whether it is in a traditional academic journal or another forum is not that important. If we want to generate more academic research, the answer is data and the positive externalities that making them available will create. Interesting questions help too. At the University of Alberta, we're lucky to be right next door to one of the big policy

## Making more data available will generate more academic research. Interesting questions help too.

*Canadian Journal of Economics* ranks 196th by impact factor and 83rd by total citations. *Canadian Public Policy*, in which the original Simpson and Emery piece appears, is not ranked. This matters, because there are many Canadian economists working with data or on issues that are not directly related to Canada or not suitable for publication in top-tier journals but that are of relevance to Canadian policy. Translating the results of these studies for a more general Canadian audience has become the role of think tanks or schools of public policy, through their publication outlets, because these are faster, more accessible to policy-makers and stakeholders, provide the same basic benefits to the authors in terms of merit judgments and may actually provide a financial incentive to boot. Again,

questions of the day in Canada, and my colleagues and I are working on many oil-sands-related projects. But, of course, it's not just us: scholars from across the world are interested in working on oil sands issues, and the more data are made available, the more work will be done. If those data allow answers to previously unexplored questions, or the oil sands present issues not yet explored in economic theory, the best work on it will be published in the best journals (fingers crossed on that one). As they say, don't let a good crisis go to waste. In this case, let's add another line: don't let good data on it sit idle behind a firewall while it could be fuelling useful and relevant research. ■

*Andrew Leach is associate professor, Alberta School of Business.*