Hyde Park rebuttal – 16 August 2017

I will use my time to focus on one section of Anne’s prepared remarks – “People are people. They do things for a reason. They use journal impact factor in weird ways because of ignorance. Because of convenience. Because of habit.“

This statement seems to suggest that impact factor misuse is born of laziness and lack of education. This argument frequently used to explain why “developing” or “third world countries have not achieved the political, economic, and scientific gains of the west. Rather than assuming researchers are too backward or ill-informed to understand what the metric means – why don’t we give them benefit of the doubt and examine how they’re being incentivized.

Researchers and institutions outside the research industrial complex want recognition on the global stage as peers. To do that, they must participate in the research industrial complex.

The very first hurdle to the research industry complex throws at them are publish or perish standards – that is, publication in a high impact factor journal or fail as an academic. And researchers outside the walled garden are increasingly at a loss on how to find a way in. I’ve sat in rooms with graduate students from Mexico City, Kyoto, Mumbai, Hanghou, and Rome and all of them explained to me that if your PI isn’t so and so and your institutional affiliation isn’t a global North western country, getting past the gate was much harder.

Now maybe this aspiring next generation of non-western researchers are just making excuses for bad research. Or maybe they’re be incentivized to make it into the system by any means necessary.

So consider this: Despite the fact that Chinese invented gun powder, the compass, and printing press and Arabs invented algebra and the concept of zero, the Chinese and Saudis are use cash prizes to incentivize publication in top tier journals like Science and Nature. The Chinese have paid as much as 165K to a first author for such a publication. That is the cost of entry into a system that is closed.

So perhaps misuse and misinterpretation of the journal impact factor is not due to an absence of education or effort but the result of highly effective barriers to entry perpetuated by the research industrial complex.