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Constituting the Academic Performer: The Spectre of Superficiality and Stagnation in Academia

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ABSTRACT Journal rankings and performance measurement schemes tend to become increasingly influential within many fields of research, thereby consolidating the prevalence of performativity on the life and research endeavours of many academics. The latter are nowadays often pressured to publish in 'top' journals to ensure they have a displayable level of performance. Drawing from literature on identity, this paper introduces and details the construction of the academic performer – a representation of identity which is increasingly typical of what it means today to be an actor in academia, in terms of attitudes and behaviour. Fundamentally speaking, this paper constitutes a critique of a detrimental tendency in academia, that is to say the excessive spread of performance measurement practices and the flow of superficiality and conformity they consolidate.

1. Introduction

We [i.e. the interviewee's department] were late in the list business [i.e. journal rankings] – thankfully. [...] [But] there always was a 'publish or perish' mentality. What happened is that the formality evolved. The heat was turned up gradually. Moreover, it was turned up at different times at different schools. The 1970s was when it began to be a visible phenomenon. However, it was present before that in other forms. [...]

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Initially it [i.e. tenure] was more oriented towards the quality of the papers than the quantity.

(Accounting academic 1, May 2003)

This quote from a leading senior behavioural accounting researcher (North American) emphasizes a significant shift in academia, namely, a tendency to rely increasingly on official listings of allegedly high-quality journals to measure and make sense of researchers' performance. This shift has important consequences on the flow of researchers' professional lives and on the production of knowledge. This paper explores the growing influence of journal rankings and performance measurement schemes over academia, through an analytical lens that centres the examination on the constitution of individual academics, departments and journals as *academic performers*. The discipline being investigated is accounting from a North American viewpoint – although there are no reasons to believe that the argument cannot be extended (at least partially) to other geographic areas or other disciplines of the social sciences.¹ The present paper should therefore not be conceived of as an idiosyncratic problematization of a single area of research; it has broader implications as institutionalized logics and practices in a given area do not develop in a vacuum (Foucault, 1966). In particular, given the ties between accounting research as a sub-discipline and the broader discipline of business studies, I will from time to time refer to the latter, depending on the nature of the situations and data being analyzed. Further, the paper's argument is not circumscribed to either one of the quantitative or qualitative paradigms of accounting research. On the contrary, I claim that identity representations which celebrate performers are gaining in influence in both paradigms – not least because of cross-paradigmatic networks which allow researchers to develop inter-subjective understandings (e.g. department meetings and association conferences).

One important feature of this paper is to draw from literature on identity to develop the notion of academic performer, and to illustrate how representations of identity can be relied upon to understand the flow of academic life and how the latter changes as a result of shifts in the discursive environment. Although several authors have investigated the impact of performance measurement practices on academic identity, especially in the UK following the adoption in the 1980s of the Research Assessment Exercise (e.g. Harley and Lee, 1997; Harley, 2002; Willmott, 2003), their analyses were carried out before formalized journal rankings became highly influential – at least in the field of business research. The present study extends this line of research by providing insight into the process by which growing reliance on journal rankings and performance measurement schemes have strengthened researchers, departments and journals represented, viewed and acted upon as performers. It is argued that various consequences ensue from the growing influence of rankings and measurement practices, not least a tendency to assess researchers on the basis of their 'hits' instead of the substance of their work, and a disincentive to innovate and conduct research

which strays from beaten tracks. In short, the growing performatization of academia implies the risk of superficiality pervading knowledge development processes. Further, in contrast to most previous research in the area, this study presents North American evidence, therefore pointing at the global effects (though by no means entirely uniform) that the intensification of performance measurement generates in academia across geographical boundaries, notably in reinforcing a dispersed network of disciplinary mechanisms centred on targets of performance and in strengthening representations of academics as performers.

Various writers have argued that we live in an era in which expectations of self and others to perform, and provide public demonstrations of performance, are considerable (e.g. Lyotard, 1979; Porter, 1995). In particular, Lyotard (1979) develops the notion of performativity and notes its growing influence on society. Performativity can be defined as a set of ideas and practices which stress the search for technological optimality via the most efficient input/output ratio. Performativity is now promoted in a vast range of spaces – not only in the domain of machines but also in the world of social relationships, including the public sector (Power, 1997a). Importantly, contemporary advocates of performativity often stress that the performance of organizations, groups and individuals has to be operationalized and translated into detailed, calculable targets and measures. Several intellectuals (e.g. Simpson *et al.*, 2002) have noted that performance measurement is now often routinely considered as matter of fact; ‘league tables’ and other classification schemes have become primary measures of success and achievement of organizations as well as individuals.

The powers of performativity and of the related notion of performance measurement should not be underestimated. Performance measurement opens up new fields of visibility which reallocate the attention of actors and significantly impact behaviour and reputation. Lyotard (1979) goes so far as to say that performativity engenders a certain level of terror, in that organizations and individuals are increasingly required to perform otherwise they are doomed to collapse and disappear. Terror is notably sustained through social practices which stigmatize those who fail to perform as ‘losers’. As shown by Sandage (2005), contemporary society is characterized by a strong tendency to worship individual success and to blame failure on faulty individuals and organizations which are deemed to lack abilities, ambition or ethics – instead of casting doubt on system attributes.

Academia is not beyond the ascendancy of performativity. Several epistemologists have noted that science and research are socially constructed and subject to the influence of surrounding discourses (e.g. Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Whitley, 2000), including that of performativity (Lyotard, 1979).² While a genealogy of the rise and spread of performativity in academia is a relevant and legitimate endeavour, my interest is on a recent phenomenon which participates to the performatization of academia, that is to say the growing influence of formal schemes to measure, rank and make sense of the

performance of knowledge producers and conveyers, and the impact of these schemes in sustaining a particular type of identity representation, that of the academic performer. As epitomized by the *Financial Times* Business School Ranking, these schemes promote a hierarchical ordering of journals which is used to discriminate outlets and swiftly assess the significance of published articles. Before going further, it should be stressed that contemporary practices focused on the measurement of academic performance are seen as the intensification and extension of a tendency, influential for some time, towards the use of measurable performance indicators in academia. For example, the Social Sciences Citation Index, which is undeniably a device allowing the measurement of performance in terms of publications and citations, was established in 1972. However, within the last several years the practices and effects ensuing from the measurement of academic performance have intensified significantly, especially in the field of business research.

Thus, the present paper is based on the observation that performance measurement schemes based on journal rankings tend to become increasingly influential in a number of disciplines, exerting significant pressure on researchers to publish in 'top' journals to ensure they have a displayable productivity – otherwise their careers are at risk of perishing (Lee, 2004; Lukka, 2004). Specifically, I rely on literature, interviews I carried out with several accounting academics, as well as my own experience to illuminate ways in which journal rankings and performance measurement schemes are deployed and take hold in accounting academia, and to reflect on wider implications of an institutional order where the notion of academic performer is increasingly solidified.

Fundamentally speaking, this paper takes position against the excessive spread of performance measurement in academia and the flow of superficiality and conformity it consolidates. A key assumption upon which the paper is predicated is that of multivocality: multiple perspectives are needed to understand social objects such as accounting or corporate governance (Shapiro, 2006; Williams *et al.*, 2006). As argued by Abbott (2001) and Flyvbjerg (2001), the value of the social sciences does not lie in their predictive power, but in their capacity to provide multivocality to the study of social objects through diverse languages, lens and metaphors. Social life resists a univocal methodological approach (Williams *et al.*, 2006).

My argument is that widespread reliance on journal rankings and performance measurement schemes participates to the construction of academics as performers while promoting and stimulating superficiality, that is to say restraining intellectual innovativeness and the development of multiple voices. In a context which emphasizes the quest for measurable performance, individual researchers are encouraged to carry out research projects and write manuscripts in terms that are likely to be acceptable to high-performing journals, thereby diminishing researchers' motivations to innovate in pursuing novel but riskier lines of thought. Tenure decisions are increasingly rendered based on a minimum threshold of publications in high-performing journals (and less in accordance with the substance of academic writings). Editors of high-performing

journals are motivated not to sway too far away from the typical papers accepted for publication in order not to threaten the position of their journal within the surrounding performativity order. Through these processes, actors increasingly account (voluntarily or not) for their performance via narrow measures of performance, thereby contributing, on the one hand, to the framing of academic identities within a performativity template, and facilitating, on the other hand, the manageability of intellectuals. Through the development of connections between the notions of performance measurement, identity representations and superficiality, this paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of institutional pressures and power in academia.

At this point, it is important to recognize that constraints on multivocality and pressures toward superficiality do not exclusively ensue from the spread of performativity or the recent performance measurement mania surrounding academia. Epistemological contests have always characterized scientific fields, with proponents of given ways of apprehending social life (e.g. positivism) trying to promote their own philosophy through publications and conferences as well as the control of editorial boards (Déry, 1989; Williams *et al.*, 2006). Such contests may result in the (more or less temporary) dominance of a scientific paradigm. However, the key point being argued here is the expanding degree of influence that performance measurement exerts in scientific fields through the constitution of performers, and the constraints that the movement generates or strengthens in terms of innovation and multivocality.

The paper's argument depends notably on my own flow of experiences as an accounting academic, especially at the University of Alberta (which is commonly viewed as a significant centre of accounting research in North America – Mathieu and McConomy, 2003) where I was employed from 1998 to 2006. As a matter of fact, it can be argued that through my work and achievement of tenure at the University of Alberta I came to develop into an academic performer, or at least to be perceived as having certain features of the academic performer identity. As an actor in the field, I am enabled, following Ahrens and Chapman (2006), to theorize about the logic of the social system within which I worked and to direct my reflective gaze on the flow of my past experiences. I consider these experiences not to be atypical of the career path of accounting academics in North American research institutions – although inevitably my experiences are characterized with some degree of idiosyncrasy. It is worth noting that the use of biographical methods in the social sciences is growing (Haynes, 2006), offering a valuable means of understanding identity formation and the influence of the discursive context on the latter.

The present paper should not be seen as a critique targeted at the research-based institution which hired me once I finished my doctoral studies. On the contrary, I enjoyed many aspects of my daily life at the University of Alberta and I believe that the organization provided me with an institutional environment that played a significant role in my development as a qualitative and critical researcher. Very few business schools in North America are open to the principle

of intellectual multivocality to the extent that the University of Alberta's School of Business is, whose hiring practices are centred on the employment of academics belonging to different and (oftentimes) contradictory paradigms. I rely on my working experiences as a basis to critically reflect on what I consider to be a detrimental tendency in the discursive environment surrounding business academia, that is to say the excessive spread of performance measurement and the flow of superficiality it generates.

The remainder of the paper comprises three sections. First I set the stage of the study by specifying the theoretical framework that underlies the paper's argument, which is derived mainly from sociological work on identity. Focusing on the field of accounting research, the subsequent section investigates the construction of individual academics, departments and journals as performers. I also reflect on wider implications ensuing from this construction. In the last section I present my conclusions, and what I view as the paper's main implications.

2. The Formation and Spread of Identity Representations

While there are exceptions (e.g. Latour and Woolgar, 1979), academics have not been particularly inclined to reflect on their own work, nor on changes in the nature of their work (Miller, 1991). This paper undertakes such a reflection through theoretical underpinnings drawn from a stream of sociological research on identity, where identity is seen as playing a key role in human sense-making, providing us with an idea of who we are and of how we relate to others and to the world (Woodward, 1997a). Identity also marks the ways in which we are similar to others who share our position, and the ways in which we are different from those who do not.

Specifically, identity is viewed from a perspective which emphasizes the role of discourses in the constitution of identity representations – which I conceive as ways of defining a social group and its distinctive features.³ Identity representations are used by actors to make sense, for example, of what it means to be an academic, a department or a journal. They are instilled (more or less extensively) in the interpretive schemes of a number of individuals and are conveyed through talk, writing and other means of expression. Identity representations are also inscribed in structural mechanisms used by organizations to regulate and manage individuals, such as organizational policies and incentive schemes (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Empson, 2004). In sum, identity representations are produced and reproduced through people's daily activities.

Before going further, it needs to be stressed that identity representations are multiple and often contradictory (Goffman, 1963). For example, academics are often defined as individuals who value academic freedom and professional autonomy (Harley and Lee, 1997), or as people particularly motivated to get rewards and money (Said, 1994). I argue below that a peculiar representation of academics, departments and journals – that of performers – is increasingly typical of what it means today to be an actor in academia. Further, the spread

of this identity representation is seen as resulting from a significant shift in academia's discursive environment, namely, the intensification and formalization of performance measurement schemes.

Fundamentally speaking, individuals are viewed as being surrounded in the social web by a range of more or less contradictory discourses which influence the formation and spread of identity representations. The process relates to power (Woodward, 1997b) – in that every discourse promotes the shaping of individuals' mindset (and oftentimes body) in accordance with some idealistic features – although it should be recognized that individuals undeniably have some room to manoeuvre in translating or resisting the influence of discourses.

Foucaultian studies, which are now commonly used in the qualitative paradigm of accounting research (Gendron and Baker, 2005), make us aware that representations of identity can gain in influence and spread in a community via disciplinary and self-disciplinary processes as deployed on individuals. Various institutions of modern society, such as prisons, asylums and schools have for a long time been involved in the realization of a disciplinary project which aims to regulate and govern the life of individuals through a measurement apparatus predicated on the objectification of 'deviants' – that is to say those whose performance falls below what are seen as desirable norms or standards of behaviour (Foucault, 1975). The factory is no exception as illustrated through the development of Taylorism, which centres on the measurement of the worker's task performance to provide a basis for identifying deviations from expectations. Representations of identity can therefore develop and solidify via the overt constraining of individuals, who are being subjected to the gaze of normalization and control procedures which aim to instil norms and values (as promoted in some discourse) in their mindset (Foucault, 1975). Covalleski *et al.* (1998, pp. 295–296) refer as follows to the disciplinary power of normalization:

Normalization produces hierarchies of differentiation by means of quantitative measurements and rankings. These rankings not only establish the fact of individual differences but also impose a value on them. [...] By factually evaluating individuals, the schema of the norm also specifies the adjustments and corrections that are necessary for those who fall away from the norm, thereby targeting them for programs of normalization. Hence, the action of the norm introduces homogeneity by situating the individual within a comparable grouping but also measures individual differences so that the individual is both the product of the norm and the target of normalization.

Through normalization and the detection of 'deviants', individuals may be pressured to alter their self in a way that is consistent with a given representation of identity, as conveyed via some discourse(s) in their surrounding environment. In contrast, or more realistically in conjunction with disciplinary processes, the influence of discourses on the self is also achieved via self-disciplinary processes,

in which the stake is the individual's adherence to a particular discourse and underlying identity representation through self-examination: the individual may then become reflectively enrolled in the discourse and behave as active partisan in her/his environment (Foucault, 1988).

The above paragraphs highlight that the discursive construction of identity representations operates at two levels: disciplinary and self-disciplinary. Importantly, identity representations develop not only from the influence of discourses (through disciplinary and self-disciplinary processes) as targeted specifically at certain individuals, but also from the ways in which surrounding others interpret and internalize normalizing processes as deployed on the targeted individuals (Schutz, 1967). Moreover, internalization ensues from individuals' reflections arising from their continuous exposure to the rhetoric and practices which underlie surrounding discourses. In light of all this, it can be maintained that a given representation of identity is conveyed at any point in time by a (more or less unstable) network of support, whose nodes are made up of: individuals whose beliefs are consistent with the representation; supporting institutional mechanisms and practices; and buttressing inscriptions and pronouncements which circulate through channels of communication (e.g. in newspapers and e-mails).

Constructing Identity Representations in Academia

Universities have for a long time been subject to the influence of performativity (Lyotard, 1979). However, literature indicates that performativity increased its ascendancy over academia especially in the last decades, as a result of the reduction of public funding and the growing share of corporate funding in university revenue (Turk, 2000; Willmott, 2003; Parker and Guthrie, 2005), as well as the influence of new public management (Bruneau, 2000), which fundamentally promotes that government activities should be managed as private-sector activities, with measurable goals being set and performance being measured and reported for stakeholders.

Several studies indicate that the growth of performance measurement practices within academia has engendered significant effects, not least in encouraging the development of identity representations which associate the objective of research to the constitution of a (departmental or individual) portfolio of 'hits' in well-perceived journals. For example, Miller (1995) argues that as academics are increasingly constrained and controlled through an apparatus of performance indicators, their personal goals of scholarship and enquiry tend to be replaced with the attitude of 'whatever it takes to get published'. In the UK, the establishment of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which ties the funding of academic departments to indicators of performance, is seen as having strengthened the appeal of producing visual displays of publications obtained in a discipline's 'core' journals (Harley and Lee, 1997). Harley and Lee's (1997) survey indicates that although a number of academics express

some discomfort vis-à-vis the RAE (for example, in terms of an alleged impoverishment of research), most of them acknowledge that they refrain from engaging in active resistance. Many of their respondents reportedly feel constrained to 'play the game' and recognize that they modified the direction of their work to fit in with the criteria of 'excellence' favoured by the RAE – undertaking research projects which are more likely to pay off in the short term instead of riskier and perhaps more innovative undertakings. As a matter of fact, within a relatively short time span the Exercise has come to constitute a significant part of the vocabulary which British researchers use to make sense of their realities (Keenoy, 2005). In light of this, it is reasonable to maintain that identity representations of academics as performers were in the process of developing in the 1980s and 1990s. Academics were then increasingly identified and valued as producers of commodities in the form of publications and awards (Willmott, 2003; Lee, 2004). Commodification implies academic performers not being highly committed to their affiliated department: performers tend to resist involvement in departmental activities which do not pay off in terms of their record (Puxty *et al.*, 1994), and they do not show remorse in selling themselves to the highest bidder (Harley, 2002).

The present paper contributes to this stream of research by examining how recent and growing interest towards journal rankings and performance measurement schemes in business academia have allowed identity representations of researchers, departments and journals as 'performers' to consolidate. Background information on journal rankings is therefore warranted. Wedlin (2006) studied the rising influence of journal rankings in business academia. She notes that journal rankings have proliferated in the realm of higher education from 1999 onwards, having swiftly become one of the most central concerns within business schools, especially for deans who increasingly feel the need to play the rankings 'game'. Her study indicates that rankings exert influence in various ways, defining the type of social capital that is required for participation in the field, rendering academics' activities more amenable to outside scrutiny, and engendering anxiety regarding one's position in the rankings. Wedlin (2006) also highlights that journal rankings can exert significant influence on identity – although her study is more focused on analyzing, from a broad perspective, how the field of business education is impacted by the rankings game.

How can journal rankings and performance measurement schemes impact behaviour and identity? Performance measurement implies reliance on socially produced and shared classifications which divide actors and order them in hierarchies. In so doing, performance measurement can be viewed as a normalizing technology which renders visible certain representations of behaviour and allows other individuals to intervene at a distance (Neu and Graham, 2006). Being castigated as abnormal or outside the norm – or being fearful of being seen as abnormal – tends to incite effort to normalize and alter identity. These processes are sometimes described as 'mathesis': the establishment of a hierarchical order

through measurement which enables the individual's place within a given population to be known (Foucault, 1975; Townley, 1993). In particular, mathesis strengthens the development of social norms which emphasize the constant search for advantage, seen as essential if one is to keep a step ahead of the pack and avoid the threat of being stigmatized as a low performer (Dent and Whitehead, 2002).

Performance measurement devices like journal rankings are therefore likely to have a significant impact upon the development of identity representations. Accordingly, Wedlin (2006) reports that a number of deans in business schools are literally obsessed with the position of their school in rankings – to the extent that they establish within their respective institutions an array of disciplinary practices in trying to gain some hierarchical ranks. Academic productivity is increasingly measured and made sense of through performance indicators predicated on 'hard' data such as grants, citations and the number of publications. In short, it can be argued that performance measurement – through disciplinary and self-disciplinary processes ensuing from normalization – seeks to construct actors in the field of academia in a peculiar way, namely, as performers. Hugh Willmott theorizes on the matter as follows:

Individual academics, departments, and institutions are currently being offered incentives to derive a sense of purpose and identity less from the substantive relationships with students, or even from their capacity to foster a supportive environment for scholarship and research, and more from the rankings they achieve. In turn, the ratings can become a major source of *self-evaluation*, and associated self-disciplining actions, especially when they have material consequences in terms of funding and career opportunities.

(Willmott, 1995, p. 1024 – emphasis in original)

Whether the construction of the academic performer is achieved through disciplinary or self-disciplinary processes is not a crucial difference to make for the argument developed in the present paper; what matters is the relationship between identity representations and context, which is increasingly dominated by a discourse stressing the measurement of performance. Focusing on a specific case, I analyze below how journal rankings and performance measurement schemes increasingly consolidate a regime of disciplinary and self-disciplinary practices surrounding academics in the area of business studies, and how rankings and schemes impact the field in terms of identity representations being sustained and the nature of knowledge being produced. A key feature of the argument is that public measures of performance allow others (and the self) to easily develop a judgment regarding the quality of publications and journals.

3. The Construction of the Academic Performer

In his book on the social organization of the sciences, Whitley (2000) highlights that in every field of research scientists are fundamentally concerned about establishing and maintaining their reputation, and their quest for reputation is subject to tension between novelty and conformity. One of the primary ways in which scientists construct reputation is by producing and publishing papers that display work that is perceived to be novel, original and innovative, that is to say, different in significant respects from the work that belongs to their field's main corpus of knowledge. However, innovation is not unconstrained given that publication in academic journals fundamentally depends on convincing powerful others (especially journal editors and reviewers) of the quality and contribution of submitted manuscripts. The degree of innovation in a scientific field is therefore restricted by the necessity of showing how new contributions to knowledge fit in with the extant corpus of knowledge. Conformity is therefore another key feature of knowledge production. Whitley (2000, p. 19) points out that conformity is especially sustained through a complex control system:

Control is exercised collectively [...] by imposing standards and criteria on the evaluation of results, and hence directing work along certain lines to the exclusion of others. The perpetual generation of uncertainty in the sciences is monitored and controlled through this formal system which ensures that research never becomes too 'original'. To be recognized as contributions to knowledge, [...] research results must follow current priorities and use accepted procedures to be accepted for publication. Innovation and novelty is thus always tempered by the exigencies of the control system.

I argue below that increasing reliance on performance measurement promotes and reinforces representations of academic actors as performers, while strengthening conformity and superficiality in the field.⁴ Public demonstrations of performance are now essential to the constitution of one's reputation; it is therefore to the advantage of researchers to ensure that they continuously 'score', especially in high-performing journals – otherwise they remain confined to marginality. In this context, intellectual innovativeness is increasingly likely to be considered by a number of academics as a risky enterprise – even as irrational behaviour. Whitley (2000) holds a similar argument, highlighting that demands for accountability and performance measurement translate into tendencies to favour research strategies that produce 'visible' and 'reliable' knowledge at regular and short intervals, thereby threatening to reduce intellectual diversity.

My interest in performativity in the field of business dates back to the year 2000, when the School of Business at the University of Alberta began to express strong interest in journal rankings. Between then and the time I left (2006), I regularly printed e-mails (and attachments) from the chairperson of my department or the School's office of the Dean which were connected to

rankings or performativity. The collection of printouts I gathered constitutes a database which supports the flow of my experiences as they relate to the construction of academic performers.

When I was hired at the University of Alberta's School of Business, it was already common practice for annual wage increases, promotions and tenure decisions to be based largely on publications – especially in prestigious journals. However, before the year 2000 evaluations of performance (to my knowledge) were not supported through formal journal rankings – although it was informally understood that 'prestigious' journals in accounting consisted of five journals: *Accounting, Organizations and Society* (AOS); *Contemporary Accounting Research* (CAR); *Journal of Accounting and Economics* (JAE); *Journal of Accounting Research* (JAR); and *The Accounting Review* (TAR). However, on 18 October 2000, the Dean sent a memo to all departmental chairpersons requesting departments to establish a formal list of journals:

We are presently engaged in a [...] policy [...] [which] involves our School of Business defining a list of journals, especially those we would consider in the A category. The purpose [...] is to assist in tenure, promotion and increment decision-making. As I have repeatedly stated, a list of journals is not a substitute for assessment based upon reading of the articles themselves. Nevertheless, it is useful to have guidelines as to journals in which faculty should aspire to publish. The ability to publish in such journals is in itself an indicator of ability and accomplishment.

The above quote implies concerns regarding the establishment of formal listings of journals which could be used as shortcuts in evaluating researchers' performance. Nonetheless, it alleges that the benefits of formal listings clearly compensate for potential drawbacks. Complying with the Dean's request, my department established (in a document dated 5 February 2001) a ranking of accounting journals, with five journals identified as 'first tier accounting research journals' (i.e. AOS, CAR, JAE, JAR and TAR), 22 journals labelled as 'good accounting research journals below the first tier' and six practitioner journals identified as 'high-impact practitioner journals related to accounting'. In the same document, members of the department were also explicitly encouraged to publish in 'high quality journals in related academic or high-impact practitioner fields' such as economics, ethics, finance and management. However, the department's internal ranking was subsequently downplayed as the School rapidly paid attention to the emerging listing of business journals established by the *Financial Times* (FT) and the position of the School in the FT Business School Ranking.⁵ FT rankings were swiftly emphasized in the School's self-promoting documents, as illustrated below:

In the 2006 *Financial Times of London* rankings of global business schools, our MBA program is in the top 100. In research, we rank in the top 50

globally, which means that we are among the top 25 publicly funded business schools globally. We also rank in the top seven globally in economics making us the only Canada business school to place in any of the 'top ten' categories identified by the *Financial Times*.

(University of Alberta's School of Business, 2006, p. 5)

This self-promoting behaviour is far from unique; the vast majority of the 100 schools listed in the FT annual rankings publicly refer to their position on their websites and brochures (Bradshaw, 2007). Della Bradshaw (2007, p. 54) – who is Business Education Director at the FT – claims that deans typically have a love and hate relationship regarding FT rankings: 'the business schools deans who complain the most vociferously about rankings are often also the ones who use their ranking position most actively in their marketing and promotion'. In so doing, deans participate in the legitimization of the rankings and, arguably, in the superficialization of academia.

The *Financial Times* produced its first ranking of full-time MBA programmes (North American and European) in 1999. The aim 'was to produce a listing of the business schools that were producing the global managers for the twenty-first century' (Bradshaw, 2007, p. 54). In spite of some variation over the years, the FT rankings have been based on a set of about 20 criteria that relate to what are seen as three broad dimensions of performance: the career progress of alumni; the international focus of the programme; and the idea generation (research capabilities) of the school (Bradshaw, 2007). Every year business schools fill out a survey used to produce the ranking. Interestingly, the data provided by the participating schools is subject to the oversight of auditing technologies:

We are the only organisation [among the group of organizations which publish business school rankings], I believe, which independently audits the data supplied to us for schools. To put it accurately, KPMG reports on the results of obtaining evidence and applying specified audit procedures related to selected data provided for the surveys. We began this auditing process back in 2001, so have just completed the fifth audited MBA ranking. As part of the five-year review process the *Financial Times* recently commissioned a short report from auditors KPMG, asking them to advise us on how best to frame our questions in order to make them easy to audit. KPMG were also asked to highlight the best practices they have witnessed in the 117 schools they audited for us. This second report was sent to all schools that participated in the *Financial Times* MBA rankings in April 2006.

(Bradshaw, 2007, p. 58)

Data being audited by a Big Four firm implies high stakes involved in FT rankings. The participation of auditors and their role in rendering the data

auditable (Power, 1996) also imply superficialization. Generally speaking, auditors tend to focus their assessments of non-financial performance on the measurement of quantifiable inputs and outputs, reflecting their background in financial accounting (Gendron *et al.*, 2007). Undeniably, the vast majority of auditors are not qualified to understand subtleties in course curricula, research articles and journal policies. Instead, auditors' work is predicated on a broader viewpoint, aimed at the development of quasi-universal measures and standards of performance which, in the same way as generally accepted accounting principles, are presumed to facilitate users' comparison of performance across different settings (Gendron *et al.*, 2007). Site idiosyncrasies and complexities are occulted for the sake of developing measures that possess a key rhetorical strength: generalizability (Latour, 1999). General measures of performance do not require auditors and users to have a detailed knowledge of local settings or specialized skills (Power, 1997b).

One of the FT ranking's criteria which exerts an increasingly preponderant role in the daily life of business academics consists of the 'Research Rating', which is based on publications in a set of 40 international academic and practitioner journals (for details see Bradshaw, 2007). Within just a few years following its creation, the FT Research Rating became a significant part of everyday life at the University of Alberta. For example, the School of Business published from 2002 to 2005 four issues of a brochure entitled *Research Focus*, which aims to provide 'a snapshot of some of the research work being done by our award-winning faculty members' (University of Alberta's School of Business, 2002, p. 1). At the time of my employment at the University of Alberta's School of Business, a hard copy of *Research Focus* was distributed to every faculty member; obviously the document had a broader distribution given its location on the School's website – under the heading 'External Relations'. Articles published by faculty members are highlighted in *Research Focus*; importantly, articles published in FT top journals are specifically identified in a separate section. Articles published in 'other' (i.e. non-FT) refereed journals follow. Surely, the institutionalization and consecration of the FT Research Rating at the University of Alberta influenced behaviour.⁶ Acceptance of a paper published in a journal included on the listing typically generated a congratulating e-mail from the Associate Dean of Research. In contrast, another publication (Gendron and Suddaby, 2004) in a newly launched journal, *Canadian Accounting Perspectives*, generated the following comment from one of the School's associate deans: 'You should have published this in a decent journal.' Through a variety of disciplinary and self-disciplinary processes varying from formal annual meetings with departmental chairs to hallway discussions with colleagues, the organizational context in which I worked significantly contributed to the construction of academic performers.

Accordingly, *Research Focus* is revealing of an organizational climate that is highly conducive to the cult of performance. The document celebrates the successes of the organization's academic performers; in addition to faculty publications, it highlights awards and recognitions earned by faculty members

(e.g. journal awards; appointments to the editorial board of prestigious journals), as well as grants obtained by faculty members from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), with mention in bold type of the amount of money awarded and the competitive rank the project achieved out of the total number of projects submitted for funding to SSHRC.⁷ The message is clear: one's visibility (and fate) in the institution depends crucially on her/his performance being celebrated in such reports.

Not only do the FT rankings influence individual researchers and business schools, but also they exert pressure on journals to remain on the listing. Inclusion is not perpetual. For example, on 5 July 2006 an e-mail was sent by administration to all staff of the University of Alberta's School of Business highlighting that two journals had been removed from the list and replaced by two others. Regardless of the motivations for removals, the latter are likely to be interpreted as ensuing from poor performance. Journals need to perform properly otherwise they risk being expelled from the listing, thereby threatening their reputation in the research community.

Alongside FT rankings, Web of Science's SSCI (Social Sciences Citation Index) is another performativity driver that is increasingly influential in business schools. SSCI is a database whose primary data consists of articles published in 'over 1,700 of the world's leading scholarly social sciences journals covering more than 50 disciplines' (SSCI, 2007). The Index is predicated on the claim that 'a relatively small number of journals publish the bulk of significant scientific results' (Thomson, 2004). This claim was often taken for granted at the University of Alberta's School of Business, where it was basically assumed that journals included on SSCI were either 'A' or 'A -' journals. For instance, it was pointed out to me that my publication in *Auditing: A Journal of Practice & Theory* (Gendron *et al.*, 2004) was considered as an 'A -' publication given that the journal, although not included on the FT listing, is part of SSCI.

SSCI is especially noteworthy for the 'impact factor' measure it provides to assess journal performance. The impact factor of a journal is defined as 'the average number of times articles from the journal published in the past two years have been cited in the JCR [Journal Citation Reports] year' (SSCI, 2005). I contend that reliance on such a short-term impact measure in the social sciences – at the very least in the area of business – is inappropriate given the time it takes for submissions to translate into published articles.⁸ With regard to the last five publications I have in accounting journals, the time between initial submission (to the journal in which the paper was ultimately published) and publication varies from two years to four and a half years. In this context, how great is the likelihood of an article published in year X being cited in articles published within the subsequent two years? Furthermore, even if the calculating scheme was extended by several years, the impact factor attributes equal weight to every article or book included as reference. Given that a majority of references in a paper only play a secondary role and are not

really indispensable to the argument (Déry, 1989), it seems quite inappropriate to take every reference into account when assessing a journal's impact.

The impact factor contributes to the spectre of superficiality gaining in reality within academia. What increasingly matters for a journal's legitimacy are articles generating references – even trivial ones – within a short-term perspective. Also, a number of journals legitimize the impact factor by promoting it as a relevant accountability disclosure, therefore contributing to the superficiality movement. For instance, on its main web page *Long Range Planning* takes pride in having an impact factor higher than that of certain other journals:

Our goal is to be essential reading for senior managers, and those involved in executive education. We are regularly ranked alongside the Harvard Business Review, Sloan Management Review, California Management Review and Academy of Management Executive and our material is often reported in the Press. According to SSCI [Social Sciences Citation Index], our citation score in 2006 was 1.05: above that of California Management Review and Sloan Management Review. This indicates a transformation of the journal's acceptance among leading academics.

(Long Range Planning, 2007)

Many business schools also legitimize further the impact factor by using it to discriminate journals in their own internal listings.⁹ That so many educated people in academia rely on such a narrow measure of journal performance is perhaps indicative of the unquestioned trust that people tend to see in numbers (Porter, 1995).

Another superficial measure of accountability which is often used by journals is the average number of days it takes for a journal to process new submissions until the first editor letter is sent to the author(s). This measure is typically emphasized in association journals, including those of the American Accounting Association and the Canadian Academic Accounting Association. Comments made by journal editors in annual accountability reports often display pride from reductions in submission turnaround. Editorial emphasis on turnaround is often complemented with a review policy that imposes or suggests relatively short review delays on reviewers – such as 30 days. While short delays may avoid procrastinating behaviour on the part of certain reviewers, one may wonder whether this practice will eventually affect negatively the quality of reviews.

In sum, although quantitative measures of performance are limited in the insight they provide on the quality of journal articles, academics and research stakeholders often take (and revel in taking) 'shortcuts' to assess journal and article quality, avoiding the cost and the efforts (but also preventing one from accessing new insights and understandings) involved in reading journal articles. Being aware of the impact factor of a journal and its position in rankings allows one to conveniently construe a sense of the journal's 'performance'. Shortcuts are

also used to assess performance of individual academics – for example, when tenure decisions are made or when grant proposals are evaluated by funding agencies. These decisions are often taken by heterogeneous committees (in terms of membership) which need to assess cases or proposals from different disciplines. In such situations, journal rankings or inclusion on SSCI provide a convenient way to quickly assess the productivity of academics carrying out research in a wide range of areas.

In particular, structural mechanisms surrounding tenure review – for instance, heterogeneous committees evaluating cases from a range of disciplines – are conducive to narrow assessments. My own tenure case was assessed by the Faculty Evaluation Committee of the University of Alberta's School of Business, which comprised six members from different departments.¹⁰ External letters from scholars having an 'international stature' in their area of research were provided to the Committee, and it is clear from the tenor of the letters that the external assessors read and were aware of the content of my writings – although the letters are characterized by a few indications of performativity influence. For example:

Yves has published 9 refereed papers over six years. This is a very commendable level of productivity. As a baseline, I refer to Mathieu and McConomy (*Canadian Accounting Perspectives*, 2003) who examine Canadian accounting publication productivity between 1990 and 2000 in a sample of 10 leading refereed journals. Interestingly, the University of Alberta was ranked as the most productive accounting department in Canadian Universities with an average of 0.145 publications in the sampled journals per faculty member per year. If their data can be extrapolated to the period 2001–2005, I believe that Yves, with 2.83 articles in these journals (weighted for co-authorship), will be ranked among the top ten Canadian accounting academics for research productivity.

In addition to the impressive quantity of published articles, Yves has also been successful in placing his articles in good quality journals. While there is considerable subjectivity in journal rankings, there is very little disagreement that *Contemporary Accounting Research* and *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, in which Yves has published three of his articles, are among the top tier of academic accounting journals.

(External letter 1)

In spite of being suspicious about the subjectivity of journal rankings, the external assessor relied heavily on them to build an argument supporting my tenure case. Such a paradoxical attitude is, I believe, held by a growing number of academics who feel uncomfortable with the surrounding regime of performativity but who nonetheless continue to perpetuate its influence through their actions and behaviours – perhaps because measurement of

performance is now recognized as one of the fundamental ‘rules of the game’ in academia, as suggested by Lee (2004).

It appears that superficiality also characterized to some extent the internal processes of the Faculty Evaluation Committee’s review of my tenure case. A senior member of the Faculty later mentioned to me having doubts as to whether any Committee member had read any of the papers I had published. This person was told that most of the Committee’s discussion was aimed at pondering the position of the journals where I published in the hierarchical order of journal rankings. This behaviour is not specific to a particular time and place; as pointed out by Lee (2004), tenure decisions in research-based universities are increasingly related to the number of ‘hits’ achieved in research journals. Although I am somewhat simplifying the argument, it can be maintained that those whose profile fits within the archetypical academic performer are more likely to be granted tenure in academic-oriented institutions while the ‘others’, the lesser performers, are unlikely to obtain it, often having to seek employment in education-based universities less endowed with extensive research resources. As a result, the latter people may be expelled from the centre and relegated to the periphery of the research community.

Granting agencies also contribute to the spread of performance measurement practices and identity representations of academics as performers – via the assessment criteria they use, the heterogeneity of their assessment committees and the diversity of the proposals they receive. One of the main criteria used by granting agencies to assess proposals consists of evaluating the applicant’s prior productivity. For example, 60% of the total score of proposals (standard research grants – regular scholars) submitted to SSHRC relates to the ‘Record of Research Achievement’ – the remaining 40% being used to assess the research proposal itself. It was pointed out to me that in the latter years SSHRC committees in the area of business significantly rely on the FT listing of ‘high-quality’ journals to assess applicants’ Record of Research Achievement.¹¹ Also, some years ago I was involved in a committee of the *Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture* (FQRSC – Québec Research Council on Society and Culture – my translation) which provides ‘structural’ funding to research teams of business academics in Québec. The committee was made up of members from a range of areas such as accounting, finance and management, and our task consisted of assessing proposals submitted from all spheres of business studies. One of the main criteria that committee members needed to evaluate related to the productivity of the research team members. Being reflectively aware of the superficiality of SSCI, I nonetheless used it in order to assess the productivity of researchers, having insufficient time to read and get a sense of their publications. Specifically, I checked whether the journals in which submitters claimed to have published were included or not included on SSCI. Quite tellingly of the convenience appeal of formal journal hierarchies, I disturbingly have to recognize that SSCI constituted a passage point in rendering me comfortable with the assessment task I had to carry out.

It is worth noting that the logic of performance measurement even extends to the world of non-published papers. The Social Science Research Network (SSRN) is an Internet database 'devoted to the rapid worldwide dissemination of social science research' (SSRN, 2007), where academics (mostly from business disciplines in spite of the database's name) can submit their working papers. As of 23 January 2007, 110,900 downloadable full text working papers are reportedly included on SSRN. SSRN's website is replete with performance measures based on the downloading of working papers by SSRN users, such as 'top papers', 'top authors' and 'top institutions'. SSRN therefore contributes to the construction of researchers and institutions as performers – but a construction which is close to the domain of hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 1981) in that most of the papers displayed on SSRN are unpublished, working papers. An author can therefore develop a reputation as a high performer even though the key traditional feature upon which is predicated knowledge production systems (i.e. publication) is not met.¹²

So far, we have seen that a variety of processes and practices carried out in the name of performance measurement, shape and strengthen the identity of academics, departments and journals as performers. Drawing on Willmott (1995), it can be argued that satisfying performance measurement criteria is now increasingly more important than paying attention to the substance of research articles. Contents are bypassed for the sake of performativity, thereby contributing to the commodification and superficiality of day-to-day life in academia. What remains to be discussed is the extent to which the quest for performance measurement actually exerts influence on the substance and content of research.

In literature we can find several statements expressing a malaise regarding the increasing level of superficiality that characterizes academic writings, and in many of these statements connections are made with changes in the discursive environment of academia. For instance, British economists surveyed by Harley and Lee (1997) report that as a result of the RAE, departments increasingly tend to hire individuals likely to publish papers in 'core' positivistic journals, thereby reducing the space that alternative economists occupy within the system. Further, a number of the mainstream economists they surveyed pointed out that they modified their research endeavours in reaction to the RAE, striving to carry out research projects which can be swiftly completed and published rather than thoughtful ones.

Concerns regarding superficiality are also found in accounting literature. For example, Lee (2006) argues that as a result of high conformity pressures in the research community, articles in 'top' accounting journals typically describe projects that are unremarkable and commonsense, such as reporting that corporate managers deceive investors if they have incentives to do so. Hopwood (2006, p. 7) upholds that institutional careerism pressures – reinforced through recent endeavours from deans of business schools to develop publication portfolios that perform well in media rankings, accreditation appraisals and state sponsored research assessments – have played a significant role in rendering accounting

researchers 'too conservative, too intellectually constrained, too conformist and insufficiently excited by and involved with the practice or regulation of the craft'. Shapiro (2006) stresses the superficiality of corporate governance articles published in 'top' accounting journals, which have noteworthy failed to investigate whether governance reform is desirable or whether reform should be achieved through government regulation or voluntary industry self-regulation. Dowd (2004) likens the RAE in the UK to a monstrosity, whose introduction has resulted in a huge but pointless expansion of research, with no discernable social value. Parker and Guthrie (2005) argue that universities increasingly rely on market-driven corporate management tools, thereby engendering significant pressures on researchers to conduct and publish research that fits key indicators of performance – which now 'determine' academics' personal destiny. They mention that research, in so doing, becomes more and more commodified and scholars are increasingly tempted towards short-term research projects that fit the templates of 'top' journals.

Similarly, the following interview excerpt from a senior academic who has been on the editorial board of a top accounting journal for several years, highlights a progressive reduction in the degree of innovation characterizing research published in the journal (and others), possibly because of a shortage of new talent in accounting academia *and* ever-increasing career pressures:

What is happening right now is, I think, that the original productive researchers [who published influential papers in journal 'X' in the 1980s] have become senior and bureaucratic, like me. They are doing less and less research. So [Name of researcher 1] doesn't write very much now, and so on. And [Name of researcher 2] doesn't write much now either. Moreover [there has] been not a great success in transferring the interest, skills and the inclination to the next generation. There are obviously some, but there aren't such great names floating around. I think it is partly that accounting research is attracting less talent than it used to. It may well be that the academic world as a whole is attracting less talent than it used to. As a result, there is a lot of second tier, second rate people who look around to do the same thing that somebody else has done. There is less intellectual curiosity and imagination I think floating around. Maybe just because I am getting old, I can say this. But I really do sense that it is the case that the quality of the work coming through is not as great. And I am not the only one who says that. [Name of editor of top accounting journal 'Y'] would say the same. And people associated with [Name of top accounting journal 'Z'] would say the same. There is too much copying, but the copying is related to career pressures in research which are much, much greater than they ever used to be. Nobody ever worried about which journals I published my research in. I published interesting things in all manner of obscure places. People don't do that nowadays. I think that it actually helps to publish in obscure places so

you can have trial runs and more exploratory pieces rather than fully fleshed out and developed ones. It is not as if accounting is fully explored. [. . .] There is all manner of work that could be done, but why isn't it being done is the question. And I don't think particular theoretical approaches have run out of steam necessarily. [. . .] [This has] to do with the incentive structures, the motivational structures and the abilities of those in post.

(Accounting academic 2, August 2003)

Imitation would therefore abound in today's accounting academia – especially in the research published in high-performing journals. The above quote implies that accounting research is now quite removed from a domain characterized by a constant search for innovation; inability to renew talent in the field as well as rampant career pressures would have significantly stifled innovation.

In summary, as performers, researchers do not have a keen interest in challenging orthodoxies in their area and undertaking projects in untamed territories; conforming to established lines of reasoning is likely to be seen as a sensible career strategy or, even worse, the researcher will unquestioningly and routinely carry out conformist projects, assuming that innovative ideas are beyond the order of things in research. Further, in such an environment, high-status journals are unlikely to have strong incentives to innovate in publishing atypical articles given the stakes involved in maintaining their status and ranking. Established lines of thought are therefore likely to remain unchallenged in top journals, thereby contributing to a relative state of intellectual stagnation in the discipline. Briefly stated, the mania surrounding the practice of performance measurement stifles innovation while engendering and/or reinforcing pressures of superficiality and conformity. In this context, one could believe that intellectual innovation is more likely to take place at the periphery of the field, in lower-status journals. However, one should not downplay the pressures generated through a system which does not encourage academics to perform through publishing in peripheral journals. The extent to which innovation takes place in peripheral journals therefore constitutes an open question.

Finally, Lyon (2001) argues that surveillance practices have significantly developed throughout society and now pervade all spheres of social life; these practices are not operated by some central watchtower but instead by a heterogeneous and unstable network of agencies. Academia is no exception as the spread of performance measurement, in particular, renders researchers subject to the gaze of a variety of surveillance systems (Willmott, 1995). Interestingly, the FT's journal ranking system enlists business schools as agents of surveillance. Here is an e-mail excerpt in this respect, received from a representative of the FT:

We do not presume at the Financial Times to be able to judge the best management and business journals. The 40 journals selected for the research component of the FT rankings are decided upon by the participating schools. We review the journal list every one to two years based on

feedback we get from the business schools (about 200 of them) themselves. In 2006 we asked the schools to nominate one or two journals which they think should be dropped and which journals should replace them. The changes were the consensus of that review.

(E-mail communication, 8 January 2007)

In so doing, business schools actively contribute to processes that ultimately govern them and facilitate the transformation of the academics they employ as performers. Identity representations centred on the notion of performers are increasingly solidifying in the area of business studies, being sustained via a range of measurement and surveillance mechanisms. The message is clear: journals, departments and academics should perform otherwise they are doomed to be moved to the periphery of the research community, in spaces of marginality. Becoming recognized as a 'performer' provides rewards and reputations but conveys a price. The sword of Damocles is always ready to fall on those who fail to perform.

4. Conclusions

Instead of beginning the conclusion in accordance with current rhetorical customs, I would like to provocatively criticize excesses arising from the institutionalized practice of specifying explicitly in papers 'contributions' that authors set to make to literature, and the unquestioned aura of legitimacy surrounding this practice. In my mind, this taken-for-granted and widely influential convention can be conceived of as a ritualistic device which reflects and quite naively promotes the imagery of researchers as performers. After 10 years of experience in submitting papers to journals, it seems to me that oftentimes journal reviewers' assessments are excessively predicated on the assumption that in order to be publishable, a paper should display, like a shop window, a few unique and original 'contributions' to the body of existing knowledge. In accordance with the rules of that game I highlight in the present paper a few specific contributions that my study sets out to make to knowledge. However, it seems to me that most articles disappear from view a few years after having been published; for instance, only a handful of articles in accounting literature are considered as 'classics' (Brown, 1996). Is disappearance consistent with the idea of important 'contributions' being specified in published articles? Moreover, when one goes back in time and reads articles and books published several decades ago, the likelihood of finding quite similar 'contributions' is not insignificant. I believe that the excessive tendencies of researchers and reviewers to glorify papers' 'contributions' can be viewed as lying within the scope of performatization. In contrast, I argue that a paper's contribution should be seen in its ability to persuasively reproduce (more or less momentarily) some particular discourse about the world and human realities. The next paragraph makes explicit the discourse I seek to reproduce and keep alive.

Focusing on the field of accounting research, I analyzed how researchers are increasingly subject to the gaze of a disciplinary and self-disciplinary regime which celebrates journal rankings and the measurement of performance, and how rankings and measurement schemes impact the field in terms of identity representations being sustained and the nature of knowledge being produced. Operating across a variety of ways which often may seem innocuous or trivial in the context of day-to-day life, performance measurement as a discursive technology has colonized vast segments of academia and increasingly regulates the conduct of researchers. In particular, the identity of academics, departments and journals as performers is gaining in reality to such an extent that performance measurement is now a central feature of the way in which academics and stakeholders define and make sense of academia – relying often unquestioningly upon a peculiar language and vocabulary that represent actors in the field as performers. It can therefore be argued that academics, department heads and journal editors are involved in the circulation of the power of performativity, being simultaneously agent and target of power, oppressor and oppressed. One of the main sources of this power resides in the almost inescapable appeal of shortcuts to make sense of others' profile – as illustrated above via my own experience as committee member of a granting agency. Even when being sensitive about the detrimental effects of excessive performatization, individuals tend to believe that they need to behave in accordance with the 'rules of the game'. In so doing, individuals become party to their own subordination (Harley and Lee, 1997), reproducing and strengthening the bases upon which performance measurement exerts influence. Paradoxically, researchers are actively implicated in the constitution and consolidation of a regime which celebrates performance – but which they often perceive to be fundamentally flawed (Harley, 2002).

Importantly, the spread of the performance measurement logic and the constitution of academic performers are not without significant consequences, threatening to reduce intellectual innovativeness and to sustain and reinforce flows of superficiality. Performance measurement promotes the constitution of the academic performer especially through journal rankings used to make superficial judgments about the self and others – for instance, in tenure reviews or funding committees. Rankings also affect journal editors whose lives are increasingly regulated by the position of their respective journals in rankings, and the status of journals regarding shallow measures of performance such as the impact factor. Publishing articles that are likely to swiftly become cited may have become a priority for a number of journal editors.

It would be naive, however, to posit that research articles are now void of content. Instead the argument is that the content of articles is less and less deemed and used as a relevant signifier in the academic community. By and large, collective attention and sense-making are instead focused on the number of 'hits' that researchers can display, and the impact factor and other narrow measures of performance that journals report in order to account for their worth and usefulness. 'Risky' behaviour on the part of researchers writing

unorthodox papers, and on the part of journals accepting to publish such papers, is less likely to be sustained in such an environment. Paradoxically, excessive emphases on performance measurement and journal rankings may thus translate into intellectual stagnation. Perhaps the key contribution of this paper is to point out that the constitution of academic performers is a serious stake from the viewpoint of academia and society. As argued by Lee (2004), there is a crucial need to reassess a world dominated by spurious league tables and rankings, as well as superficial assessments. Whether society benefits from institutional practices which favour the production of reductionist, short-term projects is doubtful given that human behaviour is undeniably complex; however, most people tend to like simple explanations – as the domain of politics regularly demonstrates. The spread of superficiality in academia ensuing from the influence of performance measurement may therefore ironically translate into a strengthening of research legitimacy.

It is worth noting that superficialization is not confined to academia, but instead is often seen as a central trend in modern society. For example, Baudrillard (1988) maintains that we live in a world characterized by signs far and far removed from the underlying ‘reality’, such as consumer goods which are often demanded and bought for reasons which have very little to do with the basic utility of goods. Wernick (1991) notes that society is now imbued with a symbolic universe that is ‘boringly void of deeper content’. While research articles undeniably have content (which, as noted above, may have decreased to some extent over time in terms of originality), the key point is that they are often considered superficially by audiences which are increasingly stimulated and provided with means to bypass the reading of articles. Perhaps Latour’s (1987) classic statement regarding the fate of papers being in the hands of audiences should be modified, in that the fate of a paper may now depend on how it fits in the surrounding performativity order. In such a world, researchers recognized as high performers are more likely to be funded and to carry out research projects which mobilize many resources in terms of data collection, thereby increasing the potential of their work to be published and influence others. Vicious circles may be a prime feature of superficialization.

More research needs to be carried out in order to develop a grounded argument regarding the pitfalls of excessive performance measurement in academia. The stakes involved – from the viewpoint of society as well as academia – are sufficiently high to engage seriously with a social critique of the ever-expanding performativity regime. While it may be reasonable to believe that a lack of institutional incentives is detrimental in terms of research productivity, a sophisticated and intrusive system of rewards and surveillance focused on performance measurement may stifle innovation and discourage people from becoming academics, or from remaining in academia. Society in general does not benefit from the excessive influence of a given logic or discourse (Lemaitre-Rozencweig, 1986). Other discourses need to become influential enough in the research community in order to constrain the hegemonic power of performativity.

In this respect, it would be relevant to develop a better understanding of pathological effects on academics ensuing from a regime which unrelentingly rewards and punishes in the name of performance. Although we know relatively little about these effects,¹³ it is reasonable to argue that the extent of performative pressure exerted on individual researchers, especially untenured ones, is probably enough to make academia a highly stressful career, perhaps even one of the more demanding career paths in contemporary society. How many jobs are characterized by objectives of performance which are as difficult to meet as those related to tenure in research-based universities? How many jobs get people working three to six months full time on a project which only has a 15% success rate (which is the usual acceptance rate of papers submitted to top journals in accounting)? The fear of failure may be endemic in the research community, motivating academics to undertake narrower projects which are less risky for their career.

For sure, performativity and performance measurement are currently sustained by a relatively strong network of allies and resources, with agents like professional managers, accountants and consultants being in place in universities and research agencies to ensure that institutional practices regarding measurement and reporting are in place and effective (Bruneau, 2000). However, as implied by Foucault (1982), the targets of discursive technologies of governance always possess some room to manoeuvre and are always confronted with a field of possibilities. If targets refuse to conduct themselves as certain sorts of subject, then the discursive technologies are simply unable to function (Du Gay, 1997). Members of the academic community therefore possess some degree of agency which they can use in the hope of constraining the dominant logic of performance. In particular, association journals should be the target of lobbying initiatives. Members of association journals should consider the idea of forwarding propositions at their association's annual general meetings recommending editorial boards to support epistemological and methodological diversity, the objective being to sensitize boards about the importance of publishing innovative papers which are not likely to boost, from a short-term perspective, the journal's impact factor. Propositions should also be forwarded requesting meaningful accountability disclosures from editorial teams, such as the main validity criteria that are actually used to decide on the status of papers, acceptance rates regarding various paper categories (e.g. along topic and method) and explanations regarding the steps taken by the editorial team to meet the journal's mission. Rendering editorial processes more visible may indeed prevent a number of dogmatic decisions from being made; the basic idea is to favour a transformation of the editorship function by making it subject to the power of disciplinary and self-disciplinary technologies. Also, the creation of an ombudsperson position within journal organizations may help to prevent innovative papers from being rejected for myopic reasons. As a matter of fact, given the extent of power that editors (especially of top journals) currently have over the career of researchers, it is surprising that mechanisms that aim to alleviate the possibility of power abuses from editors are noticeably infrequent in journal organizations.

Ombudspersons could have the ability to publish reports on the fairness and quality of the review process. Other ways to counterbalance the excessive influence of performance measurement consist of sensitizing Ph.D. students about the matter in doctoral courses or colloquia, and ‘invading’ academic conferences with papers and special session requests aimed at exploring the influence and pitfalls of an institutional order which glorifies journal rankings and performance measurement schemes.

In conclusion, it is appropriate to be reminded of what is often considered as the prime feature of academia:

Universities’ lifeblood is academic freedom – the freedom of inquiry and research, freedom of teaching, freedom of expression and dissent, freedom to publish, freedom to express opinions about the institution in which one works. All these freedoms are to be exercised without reference to orthodoxy, conventional wisdom, or fear of repression from the state or any other source. Without these freedoms, universities cannot fulfill their function of discovering knowledge, disseminating that knowledge to their students and the society at large, and instilling in their students a mature independence of mind.

(Turk, 2004, pp. 11–12)

It is the contention of this paper that the growth and consolidation of the academic performer, sustained through a range of performance measurement practices, significantly impact the way in which research is conceived of and carried out, exercising a constraining influence on academic freedom. Although I do not believe that performativity can be easily restrained, I do hope that points of resistance (Foucault, 1980) will develop enough in order to mitigate the influence of performativity’s power network. Hopefully the present paper will contribute to the creation and reinforcement of some of these points.

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Notes

¹Accounting academics in Continental Europe (e.g. France and Spain) are increasingly subject to institutional pressures to publish in refereed journals instead of books, which were previously favoured as dissemination vehicles (García-Benau and Lafnez-Gadea, 2004). It is therefore

reasonable to assume that representations of accounting academics as performers are gaining in influence in an expanding range of countries.

²The notion of 'publish or perish', as a representation of the trials of obtaining tenure in North American research-based institutions, constitutes a relevant illustration of the influence of performativity. Shapiro (2007) found that the first occurrence of the term 'publish or perish' was made in 1942.

³Literature sometimes distinguishes self-identity from social identity. Self-identity is defined as the individual's private notion of who she/he is while social identity relates to the way(s) others see us (Watson, 2002). The concept of identity representation encompasses both notions.

⁴One of the reviewers rightfully mentioned that consequences ensuing from a high degree of conformity and control are likely to be more harmful in the social sciences than in the physical sciences, given that conformity necessarily constrains the development of multivocality – which, as mentioned in the introduction, is recognized as a central and desirable feature of the social sciences.

⁵Although *Business Week* started to publish a ranking of MBA programmes in 1988, from then until the year 2000 it only focused on US institutions (Wedlin, 2006). The *Business Week* rankings do not appear to have been significantly influential within the University of Alberta's School of Business, as I never heard of it in department meetings or in hallway discussions with colleagues.

⁶For example, in a survey study, my co-authors and I explicitly targeted the *Journal of Business Ethics* as publication outlet given its presence on the FT listing of journals (Gendron *et al.*, 2006).

⁷SSHRC is an agency funded by the federal government but which allegedly operates at arm's length from the latter, having 'full authority' to make its own programming and funding decisions (SSHRC, 2004). The agency aims to promote and support university-based research and training in the social sciences and humanities. It is one of the main providers of funds in Canada for research in the social sciences.

⁸Although the Web of Science produces longer-term impact measures (Journal Performance Indicators), the latter are not as easily available as the two-year impact factor. A search carried out by a librarian of Université Laval indicates that only one university in North America subscribes to Journal Performance Indicators.

⁹For example, the École de comptabilité (School of Accounting) in my new employing institution, Université Laval, adopted in 2005 an internal listing of journals based on four categories: A, B, C and D. To a large extent, these categories were determined through reliance on the conventional short-term impact factor.

¹⁰Specifically, the chairpersons of every department (Accounting and Management Information Systems; Finance and Management Science; Marketing, Business Economics and Law; and Strategic Management and Organization) as well as two elected members (at the time of my tenure, one elected member was involved in the area of management and the other in finance).

¹¹In a socio-political world increasingly influenced by new public management, it is not surprising that publicly funded granting agencies emphasize researchers' prior productivity in their assessment criteria. Agencies are accountable for their activities – and obviously the funding of projects which do not translate into publications in refereed journals, especially 'top' ones, is not 'useful' in a discursive context that aims to ensure that taxpayers get 'value for money'. The assumption implicit in the agencies' focus on prior productivity is that one's recent publications constitute a strong indicator of future publications. Of course, through agencies' actual funding practices the assumption may translate into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

¹²One of the reviewers pointed out that a cynical view of SSRN might be that: 'by getting early-stage research out into the public domain, journal editors increase the likelihood that research later published in their journals will be cited within the two-year window of the "impact factor"'.¹³

¹³Harley (2002) constitutes an exception.

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