

REVIEW ESSAY

Beyond the island of metrics: An addendum to Stratford's ten years of *Island Studies Journal*

ABSTRACT: Stratford's (2015) consideration of the impact of a decade of *Island Studies Journal* concentrates primarily on bibliometrics, journal citation, and on issues crucial to career oriented scholars. This addendum considers Stratford's position in light of two further issues of significance to island studies and *Island Studies Journal*: the use of technology and non-professional (university student) citation as an indicator of a(ny) journal's impact. It suggests that professional citation is but one means to assess the impact of a journal. There are several qualitatively assessable measures of success and performance available to career oriented academics and journal editors. Such yardsticks lie at the heart of a more personal interpretation of the purpose of island studies.

Keywords: bibliometrics, *Island Studies Journal*, island studies, islanders, mobilities, non-professional citation, scholarship, technology

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Introduction

I read with interest Elaine Stratford's reflective contributions on the impact of 10 years of *Island Studies Journal* in *Island Studies Journal* 10(2). In her conclusion, Stratford (2015, p. 161) offers the following plea,

that authors more routinely and faithfully engage in reading and responding to each other's work; both in the journal in debates, and in other articles in other journals. At the same time, these conversations need to be managed carefully and stringently.

My offering takes up this dialogue. As an author of both a peer reviewed article and a book review, plus a forthcoming guest editor of a proposed journal section in the journal, I believe I am in a position to offer a response and some comments and addenda which hopefully contribute to the invitation for reflection and discussion so ably launched by Stratford. Such deliberation and stocktaking is definitely valuable in academic and scholarly endeavours, especially for a new and burgeoning field like island studies: a discipline, which, as the author has astutely shown, has gone through some teething periods in its first little-more-than-a-decade.

The author and the editorial board of *Island Studies Journal* are to be commended for inviting and publishing such attentive work; it is rare to see scholars communicate in a reflective fashion about the ontology, recent history, and key developments in their own fields. What is particularly impressive is the open-mindedness and freedom which island studies has offered its adherents. This stems in part from the absence of any disciplinary canons of island studies or *éminences grises* who must be quoted and acknowledged. And it is exactly this latitude that I wish to draw on in my considerations on and addenda to Stratford's work.

I intend what follows in this essay to emphasize and reveal a different set of philosophical and empirical priorities by which island studies and *Island Studies Journal* could be evaluated one decade after its inception. Because addressing these issues was not a part of Stratford's brief, there is no question of a sin of omission. I hope the priorities I identify complement and build upon Stratford's work. I outline two key areas: the use of technology and non-professional citation as an indicator of a journal's impact.

I begin by referring to a comparable first decade stocktaking exercise of another new field of modern applied geography: mobilities or mobility studies. In their retrospective, Faulconbridge and Hui (2016) take a tack entirely different from Stratford's. The basis of the latter's critical analysis assesses the success of island studies and the rationale of *Island Studies Journal* in knowledge production, citation indexes, and the role of academic publishing in advancing scholarly careers, or put succinctly in modern academic language, the *impact* of *Island Studies Journal*. Stratford dwells on issues highly relevant and crucial to career oriented scholars: those who are forced not only to monitor these metrics, but depend on them to achieve promotion and appear employable. In contrast, Faulconbridge and Hui (2016) reflect upon mobilities as a field of study with its own past and future: they consider the vitality of their field in terms of processes of creativity, disciplinary politics, and the development of fruitful conversational interaction, which have all led to a dynamic, burgeoning, and expanding innovative trajectory and fertile future for mobilities. Faulconbridge and Hui critically and philosophically examine mobilities on their own terms. While nissology is normally defined as "a study of islands on their own terms" (McCall, 1994, p. 1), Stratford reflected on island studies in terms of the role of citation indexes, publication statistics, and the politics of publishing.

Where Stratford deals with the explicit, the measurable, the scientific, I consider a posing of island studies which deals with the implicit, that which does not necessarily offer itself well to measurement, and the creative. In these neoliberal days of journal metrics and other complicated measurements of research quality, the effectiveness and results of which are far from clear, the angle Stratford takes measures *Island Studies Journal's* hitherto contribution to island studies. This is definitely to be commended. However, among the run of statistics which the author brings to our attention, there seems to be a large gap of immeasurability or the unmeasurable, which island studies epitomises, points worth flagging in an addendum to Stratford's work.

Technology

Although conferences, symposia, and colloquia under the banners of SICRI (Small Island Cultures Research Initiative) and ISISA (International Small Islands Studies Association) and other bodies enable physical meetings, most commonly on islands, to discuss and present matters of island studies relevance, the internet is nowadays the real knowledge basis of island studies; it has made the field a reality, it has nursed and nurtured open source island studies publishing, and it has enabled a more free flowing information transfer.

The use of technology has not only enabled the development of island studies, but has been unequivocally at the centre of its continuing evolution. The role of the internet, with personal email communication and public list-serves for and within island studies, has been indispensable, and its position in mediating access to information relevant to the field cannot be emphasized enough. The terms 'internet' and 'email' appear once each in Stratford's work.

To foreground the instrumental nature of email as a means of communication, which has nurtured island studies, I use the example of the edited volume *A Taste of Islands* (Baldacchino & Baldacchino, 2012), which was initiated on 3 October 2011 through the Small Island Cultures Research Initiative (SICRI) news list and published in December 2012. I received and sent no fewer than 23 emails from and to the Baldacchino couple during this 14 month period relating directly to what was labelled an 'appetizing project' and which began its life entitled *Island food: Culinary feasts from our world of islands*. It was clear from the outset how aesthetically driven this project was: another hallmark of island studies. This process elucidates another key element of island studies research: the roles played by aesthetics and by synaesthetics (that is, the crossing over of taste, smell, sight and sounds) of islands, and the interaction of the aesthetic and sensual with the academic. The artistic appeal of *A Taste of Islands* is testament to the determination used to initiate this project from the outset. Indeed, this book has sold over a 1,000 copies, with all proceeds going to Island Studies Press at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada.

As I was a co-author of a chapter which was published among a resultant compendium of sixty other chapters on island food and culture, I can only imagine the number of emails the editors must have sent and received in relation to this project. An estimate of 800 seems reasonable. According to Google Scholar, as of January 2016, the resultant publication has not even been cited once. Still, what other measurements could we use to assess this work? One would be the role of the internet in bringing scholars together to form a collegial community; another would be that it enabled information, which would generally remain accessible only to those who have access to island knowledge/s, to be made available to a larger audience. In such a situation, I believe that such statements and realities of knowledge transfer may do much more to island studies as a field than citation metrics may do to improve the exposure and relevance of the field in modern academia.

The flexibility email offers and the ability to send and edit files quickly seems perfect for such projects, tasks which are well suited to the island studies scene. Like other modern periodicals, *Island Studies Journal* and *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* both depend intently on email and internet submissions and turnarounds, with continual editorial contact being essential for the timely publication of copy. Still, is there anything particularly island studies-esque about this approach? I would hazard a guess and say yes; island studies scholars are modern thinkers and writers who are equipped with the necessary skills to stay up to date not only with technological advancements which have revolutionized late modern academia and the production of knowledge, but with the possibility of moving from peripheral places, e.g. literal and metaphorical isolated and island-like spaces of earth and thought, to access and prosper in more centralized and regulated fora. The possibility of movement away from and towards peripheral locations, marginal thoughts, and fringing realms seems to be the basis of the developing epistemology of island studies.

The technology has allowed non-academics to access a journal like *Island Studies Journal* and hence has made a significant impact outside of academe. Because of open-access (and the internet), non-professional and non-academics have been exposed to, can engage with, and can take action on research published in *ISJ*. This influential research is not housed behind the subscriptions of large multinational publishing corporations.

Non-professional citation as an indicator of a journal's impact

What is at the heart of island studies? I believe interaction is the glue, and at its highest it is a type of interaction of aesthetics: the aesthetics of island, sea, people, and world. This interaction occurs both between scholars and between those people on islands and those who either study their own cultures, geographies, and histories or who wish to learn about their and other people's islands. Such interest will not register on citation metrics or other media. In addition, the unmeasurable impact of *Island Studies Journal* in undergraduate courses in anthropology and human geography should not be underestimated. In my own case, in 2014, a colleague in Australia informed me that, in the environmental anthropology course which he was teaching and marking, my 2010 *Island Studies Journal* article (Nash, 2010) kept appearing in his university students' reference lists. Such litmus tests provide a set of results different from the Google Scholar and Thomson Reuters measurements so common today in modern academia and highlighted by Stratford.

A publication like *ISJ* is likely to contribute to and influence research-informed teaching and the establishment of curricula at university levels. The signposted topics detail not only relevant cutting edge content, but often-at the same time relevant methodological approaches to be used in furthering island studies thinking and action.

Referring to one of the quality criteria Stratford uses, i.e. Google Scholar, it appears my own island studies publications have not been cited more than a handful of times. While this fact is available to anyone with access to the internet and who has any interest in adhering to, or at least keeping some tab on, the modern metric systems and certain quality measurement model of research which is based largely on number of citations, h-indexes, and journal rankings, there are other qualitative and intrinsic methods to assess the relevance, validity, and quality of research. Having conducted research on Norfolk Island, in the South Pacific, I have been invited into people's houses and seen my own articles about the island printed out and splayed across tables in island homes. Word gets around quickly on small islands, and many people may read and digest a single copy of any printed article. Although extremely difficult to measure such interaction and gain any statistics of such happenings, these events appear to me as at least just as important a metric by which to judge the impact of research in island studies, or research published or reviewed in *Island Studies Journal*, or any other (island studies) journal for that matter. Although it was not Stratford's brief to identify these non-metricized aspects, it is worth reemphasizing, that it may be that these interactions with and between island people, island knowledges, and island writings are at the root of what island studies, and hence *Island Studies Journal*, is about.

In presenting a position focusing on methodological issues, i.e. the use of technology, and considering the role of more ephemeral measures of research quality, I do not wish to rule out the relevance and importance of scientific measurements for assessing the impact, quality, and potential future directions of a journal like *Island Studies Journal*. As Stratford has told us, and as I agree, 'the island of metrics' congruent with the requirements of modern academia appears almost unavoidable. However, as Faulconbridge and Hui (2016) would have us believe with respect to mobilities, there is obviously and necessarily room for more qualitative assessment of any discipline's net worth after a specific amount of time. While the words 'citation' and 'impact' do not appear a single time in Faulconbridge and Hui's article, in Stratford's work these words, terms critical for publication metrics, appear around 100 times and 20 times, respectively. Where both Faulconbridge and Hui and Stratford inescapably look

toward the future decade(s) for their respective fields, anticipating the possibility for a heightened nature of change as a result of the continual recastings we continually experience in contemporary academia, it is important not to confuse means with ends.

No doubt, citation indexes have become key to an academic's career advancement. And yet, if citation metrics are to be of *any* relevance beyond academic careerism, they surely need to connect somehow with real lives, real people and real challenges on the ground. A litmus test of the 'success' of a university and its scholars is the elusive combination of high level scholarship and equally high level impact in communities and public policy.

Along with these metrics, there is another rapid change under way in academic publishing. The open access turn-cum-revolution means that disciplines like island studies and journals like *Island Studies Journal* are poised at a juncture, one which means journal editors are now being approached by multinational publishers who wish to take over journal management. Although Stratford reminds us that *Island Studies Journal* is a member of the Directory of Open Access Journals, Godfrey Baldacchino (personal communication, 14 November 2015) has intimated to me that he has been approached by larger bodies that wish to take over the professional management of *Island Studies Journal*. I would hope island studies and the outlets island studies scholars choose to use to publish and disseminate their knowledge will remain in control of the publication venues they choose to use, whether they are open access or not.

Conclusion

Island studies is as much about science as it is about art and aesthetics. As the example of *Taste of Islands* exudes, the future of island studies lies in learning, exchange, identifying and appreciating continental-island tensions, which can possibly be resolved through travel, mobility, and interacting and making friends with islanders. It is my wish and hope that this already established embodiment, which *ISJ* already represents, continues into more fruitful decades for island studies.

On a personal level, I have gained much and learned a lot through my interaction with island studies scholars and island studies journal editors. The island studies cohort is a congenial gathering of intellectuals. This to me seems to be just as important to the present and future state of the academic side of island studies, and the field's related journals, as citation indexes and other metrics. After all, island studies is about islands and islanders and maybe being insular is fine. Does island studies really have to stand up to all the metrics to which Stratford deftly either explicitly or implicitly alludes? Stratford's brief was to consider the impact of a decade of *Island Studies Journal* and not the points I have raised here; yet, this brief does not appear to be *about* island studies per se. It could have been about any journal. The compound 'island studies' could almost have been substituted with 'geography' or 'anthropology' and it might not have made much difference. At least two of the nine recommendations with which Stratford (2015, pp. 160-161) concludes are island studies specific, i.e. particularly the fourth recommendation – "highlighting the significance of findings for thinking about islands and for thinking about big questions that are intrinsic to islands" (p. 161) – and the seventh – a need to create "more in the way of special sections in issues would go some way to creating momentum around particular interdisciplinary borderlands: islands, sustainable development, and nature conservation in the outermost European regions; island decolonization; and island toponymies being three examples in train

at present” (p. 161). My question to Stratford and other (island studies) scholars is: how can *all* of these recommendations be made island specific and island focused?

Regarding going ‘beyond an island of metrics’ and ascertaining how island studies and *Island Studies Journal* are realised in the world and accessed, used, and perceived by students and just as importantly islanders, it is critical to remember that the current young scholars are the ones will become the next island studies, mobilities, or student-of-whatever-discipline scholars. Along with the vital professional reading of contemporary academia to which Stratford perspicaciously brings our attention, I believe it is similarly consequential to island studies – and any field – at least to estimate the scholarly behaviour of current and potential island studies students and islanders partial to academic discourse and how they engage with the topics presented in *Island Studies Journal*. This is definitely not a simple task, no less because there are presently no consistent and reliable metrics academics have at their disposal to gauge how non-professionals read academic writing. Regardless, having access to this information would no doubt lead to better scholarly writing and better research in general.

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