

Mayer, Thomas

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Improving Communication in Economics: A Task for Methodologists ¶

Thomas Mayer ¶

For a considerable part of the last century the central mission of economic methodologists was to introduce economists to the "received view" of philosophy of science and to its predecessors. Currently, philosophy does not possess such a seemingly useful and conveniently packaged export. At the beginning of this century methodologists, while continuing to respond to developments in philosophy of science, have therefore an incentive to expand their bailiwick to encompass some more mundane problems that arise in making economics a more efficient engine of analysis. This paper uses as an example one such issue, improving communications between economists and the public and among economists themselves. The former is a more serious problem in the United States than in some other countries; in Holland, for example, academic economists communicate much better with the general public than they do in the United States. (Cf. van Dalen and Klammer, 1987; Frey and Eichenberger, 1993)¶

Academic economists generally do not tell firms what production and marketing technologies they should use; rational utility maximization suffices to ensure efficiency. But that is not so in the academic-research industry because of a characteristic of this industry. Although pressures from ultimate consumers, that is from the universities that provide low teaching loads and the foundations that provide research grants, is not entirely lacking, it is other academic economists, that is other producers of research, who are of necessity the dominant judges of quality. 1st And they may use criteria that are inconsistent with maximizing the utility of final consumers, i.e., policy-makers and others interested in understanding how the economy operates. 2nd Moreover, path dependency may also generate inefficiency. 3rd The organization of economic research and its communication practices should therefore not be treated as something that we can leave to market processes.¶

If economists need to start thinking about the efficacy of the academic branch of the economic-research industry, it is methodologists who should take the lead. They are the ones who are charged with looking at the field as a whole, and are concerned with how efficiently it generates valid information. To be sure, they usually deal with more philosophical and esoteric topics than with such mundane matters as the way economists communicate. But given the proportion of their research time that economists spend reading, improving their communication techniques might increase research productivity significantly. And improving the efficiency with which economists generate new and valid knowledge is, after all, what economic methodology tries to do. Moreover, dealing with such a practical issue might also have the indirect benefit of drawing economists' attention to other work done by methodologists.¶

Methodologists' work on such practical and mundane issues should go well beyond stating opinions based on casual observation

and introspection (as this paper is doing), but should encompass empirical work, such as investigating how frequently certain types of papers are read either as working papers and in published form, the reading strategy of economists faced with a plethora of "should read" material, and how quickly pertinent findings spread from one subfield to another. It should also deal not only with communication among economists, but also with their communication with the public.¶

1. Communicating with the General Public ¶

The net product of the economic-research industry -- what might be called its exports -- consists of two, or arguable three items. The first is policy advice, the second is satisfaction of the public's curiosity about how the economy functions. The third, the expansion of human knowledge for its own sake is of more debatable value. Since writing for the general public (which I shall refer to as popular writing) therefore forms a significant component of one of the two, or at most three, exports of academic economists one might expect that they would hold it in high regard and devote substantial effort to it. But, although it would be going too far to say that in the U.S. most academic economists scorn those who write for the general public -- several of those who do have been elected presidents of the American Economic Association -- it seems that those American academic economists who both write for the general public and are highly respected by their peers, receive this respect neither because of, or despite of, their popular writings. 4 A young economist aiming at a chair in a major university should usually not allocate much time to it.¶

This low regard for popular writing is not entirely unjustified. Much of it is bad, as one would expect given the criteria by which magazine editors and publishers evaluate it. Not only is it technically bad, but it is often biased and strongly ideological. Sometimes it appears to be even dishonest: knowing the author's professional writings it is hard to believe that he does not know better. Moreover, in popular writing one can get away with repeating what has already been said, even if the new exposition is no better than previous ones, because it is addressed to an audience that either has not read the previous literature, or one that delights in having its views confirmed by yet another article. Furthermore, one might argue that academia exists in part to supplement the market by subsidizing research that is not appropriable, and hence its coin of the realm, peer recognition, should not be awarded to those who provide a marketable product. But although that argument deserves some weight, it is easy to overstate it. Even if universities were to honor and reward professional and popular writing equally well, those who write professional papers would still have a substantial incentive to do so, since such writing generates grants and the associated summer salary, while, popular writing does not pay all that well.¶

The just discussed legitimate reasons for downgrading popular writing are reinforced by less legitimate ones. Many, (most?) economists feel insecure in asserting their status as scientists. One reason is that much of the general public refuses to accord them that status, or indeed to privilege professional economists' analysis of economic issues over its own cocktail-party chatter or

over the thunderous profundities of editorial writers. Not surprisingly, economists tend to believe that communicating with such heathens is unimportant, and should be left to those who are incapable of contributing to economic "science".¶

Moreover, good writing for the general public requires a different set of skills than does publishing in professional journals. While it demand less mathematical skill and originality it demands not only the ability to write clearly, but also the less common ability to write in a way that sustains the reader's interest. And that usually requires the ability to see the big picture, that is, to relate the author's insight on a particular point to the usually much broader issues that interest the reader. Even a clearly written paper on, say purchasing-power-parity theory will not find much of a popular audience unless it ties this theory to issues that interest the public, such as the ability of American industry to compete with firms in low-wage countries. Good popular writing often also demands better judgment about what is important than does publishing in the professional journals.¶

It is natural to overvalue the abilities and skills that one possess and undervalue those that one does not. It is therefore hardly surprising that many academic economists do not accord much respect to authors of popular books and articles, even when they contain good economics and are well written.¶

Since there are therefore several inappropriate reasons (as well as some appropriate ones) why academic economists write so little for the general public, it would not be surprising if the volume of such writing were suboptimal. What can be done about this? Preaching to economists is generally not likely to help. To be sure, given the tendency of so many economists to imitate the actions of those with high prestige, if just a few additional highly prestigious economists were to write high caliber popular articles, that might perhaps provide the critical mass needed to make popular writing fashionable in economics. However, highly prestigious economists, too, do not welcome being preached at. Perhaps all that one can hope for is that sooner or later such a critical mass will form. We are now in a low-level equilibrium trap; and in such a situation one can always hope for a shock that will start a virtuous cycle. Suppose, for example, that some emerging policy issue induces high quality magazines, such as the *Atlanti* or the *Wilson Quarterly*, to publish more articles by well-known economists. That would stimulate other economists to write more such articles, and that, in turn, would induce popular magazines to carry more articles on economics. Another possibility is that a foundation might intervene, possibly by starting its own magazine (which need not be entirely devoted to economics), or by providing grants to economists who write popular articles. Or it might start a program of teaching economists to write better, and also teach them how to orient their writings to a popular market and where to submit them. 5 ¶

2. Communication between Academic and Other Economists ¶
Though one would hardly know it from reading the academic literature, at least in the U. S., government and businesses are

major employers of economists. Academic economics, as the fundamental research branch of the profession, owes a duty to these "silent minorities" (silent because their work is unpublished), similar to the duty that a company's R & D department owes to the manufacturing department. Little is known directly about how well academic economics fulfills this duty. Merely asking government and business economists whether they think that it does so is insufficient. Since they obtain the results of academic research essentially free, business and government economists obviously want academic economists to concentrate much more on problems of interest to them. Their complaints therefore need to be evaluated not just recorded. 6 ¶
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However, the low level of interaction in economics between academics and practitioners at least suggests that academics are neglecting their duty to practitioners. Moreover, it is likely that increased interaction would provide academic economists with valuable insights and improve their scientific judgments. Methodologists might be able to provide lessons about such interactions in other fields.¶

3. Communication Among Academic Economists ¶

Serious communication problems also exist within academic economics. We hear perpetual complaints about the impossibility of keeping up with important literature in one's subfield. There are even claims that some published papers may not find even a single reader, and that many others have just a handful of readers. Empirical tests of these claims would be a useful contribution.¶

How does a teacher of, say a graduate monetary economics course deal with the problem? He or she cannot read all the published papers and working papers that may deserve a place on the reading list. One response is to teach only a very narrow part of the field, perhaps two or three widely used models and their progeny, while hoping that students will read more widely on their own. Some will, but many won't, since their course will have left them with a very narrow view of the field. There is therefore the danger that in their own research they will ignore many important issues. 7 How serious a problem this generates for progress in the field depends, in part, on the extent to which teachers in the major graduate schools teach the same set of models.¶

A survey of the practices that economists use to cope with the torrent of publications -- for example to what extent they read working papers rather than published papers -- might help to speed the adoption of best practices. It would be particularly useful to new Ph.D's who confront the problem of now having to make up their own reading list after years of being handed such lists in their courses. Beyond surveying economists it might also be useful to see if other sciences handle the information-flooding problem better than economics does. Suppose economists spend 20 percent of their research time "keeping up." Even a 1 percent improvement in efficiency, by saving 0.2 percent of their research time would have a benefit that would greatly exceed the cost of such a survey.¶

Complaints about the inability to keep up with the literature

are, of course, not new -- I remember hearing them some 50 years ago --and they were voiced already in Marshall's time, when compared to the present the volume of publication was minuscule. The internet will perhaps make the problem worse. This depends, in part, on whether it will further the belief that authors are supposed to have read not just all the published papers, but also the unpublished working-papers on their topics. It also depends on whether, by lessening the distinction between "published" and "unpublished", and thus reducing the power of referees and editors, it will induce economists to substitute quantity for quality of "publications".¶

For academic research the market balances supply and demand very imperfectly. In the private sector if more books or articles are published while readers' demand is constant, a correction takes place until the marginal cost of publishing an additional book or article again equals the marginal utility that readers derive from it. But in academia journals live to a large extent off library subscription, where this mechanism may not be so effective. Suppose that a university were to make the following offer to its economics department. The library will eliminate its subscriptions to the one third least used economics journals and distribute the savings to members of the department. It seems likely that most departments would accept the offer. Moreover, some journals are subsidized by university presses, and most receive subsidies in the form of free services from their editors and referees. 8

What can be done to ameliorate such information flooding? The traditional response has been increased specialization. In 1900 economists tried to keep up with almost the entire subject. By the 1950s economists in major universities specialized in two or three subfields, and now some seem to specialize in only a few of the problems arising within one subfield. Such specialization has its costs. Ideas developed in one part of a subfield may also be useful in another part, or in another subfield altogether, but may take a long time to get there. Moreover, a high degree of specialization retards research by making it harder to discern which research projects are worth pursuing. Puzzles that perplex a narrow speech community, but are of little interest to anyone else, are likely to receive too much attention, and the use of sophisticated techniques is likely to be valued above the contribution they make to solving a problem of general interest. In addition, the narrowing of vision that accompanies specialization is likely to make both undergraduate and graduate teaching less effective. Methodologists could perhaps provide a useful service by trying to determine, possibly by looking also at fields other than economics, how important such losses from specialization have been.¶

Another way to cope with information flooding is to increase the efficiency with which new information can be assimilated. One aspect of this efficiency is to discriminate between important papers that we should read, and those we can skip, at least if we are not currently working on that particular problem. The standard way of doing so -- which works reasonably well -- is to discriminate by the ranking of journals. However, referees seem to

have a conservative bias that reduces the chance that even a first-rate paper that departs from the standard paradigm or employs unusual procedures is likely to appear in a top rated journal. 9 It would therefore be worth seeing whether some of the natural sciences have developed other techniques for distinguishing between first-rated and second-rate papers that we could use in economics. Probably not, but the potential pay-off makes it worth looking.¶

Another way of dealing with the mass of publications -- one that is also working reasonably well -- is to rely on survey articles to highlight the important papers and to avoid the need to read an extensive literature. It would be worth seeing if readers want additional survey articles, and if so, what type. For example, should they strive harder for a synthesis that sketches the broad lines along which the literature is advancing, or should they concentrate more on specific papers.¶

Beyond that it would be helpful to reduce the time required to read a paper. Some readers need to see the detailed proofs, other need only to grasp the intuition behind the analysis, while still others require only a relatively brief discussion of the assumptions, characteristics of the analysis or evidence used, and of the major implications and limitations. Such a demand for a quick reading should not be denigrated. On a topic on which one does not aspire to expertise it is often better -- and take no longer -- to grasp intuitively the basic idea of, say ten papers, than to work through the proofs of a single paper.¶

The abstracts that currently accompany most papers sometimes, but not always, provide the intuition. However, they are very short and hence insufficient for many potential readers, while the papers themselves demand much more of the reader's time than he or she may want to spend. And the conclusion section of papers do not always provide adequate descriptions of the intuitions and summaries of the qualifications, but sometimes may stress needed further work. It might be worth seeing whether other sciences accommodate the needs of the less than fully engaged reader better than economics does. Perhaps a journal (which could be web based) that provides much longer abstracts would be useful.¶

Finally, an obvious procedure to reduce the burden of keeping up --but one that would be hard institute -- is to convince authors to make their papers more accessible. Art critics may censure a painter for being "excessively viewer-friendly" (Littlejohn, 2000, p. A 16). We economist, who know that the less the total costs required to consume a product, the more valuable it is, may smile at such naivete or snobbery, but many economists seem to be proud if how "technical", that is hard to read, their papers are. Such an attitude is hard to combat, but it is worth trying.¶

4. Conclusion ¶

The way economists communicate both among themselves and with the general public should be improved. Standards are needed for evaluating popular writing. This would increase the respect that good popular writing receives in academia, and hence stimulate its

supply. Improved communication between academic and nonacademic economists would help to connect various parts of the economics profession. Academic economists would benefit by being brought closer to real-world problems and insights, while nonacademic economists would benefit from an easier access to new ideas. Within the academic wing of the profession information flooding is a serious problem. But the potential for reducing it exists. Admittedly, the pay-off is uncertain since on this issue it is difficult to back one's recommendations with strong evidence, and since even when strong evidence is available it is hard to change prevailing practices and policies. But the potential pay-off is large.¶

Endnotes ¶

1. For example, sales of books oriented to the general reader depend upon their appeal to these ultimate consumers, and to some extent student complaints do affect textbook sales.¶

2. Such a problem is not unique to economics, but shows up also in other areas, such as medical care, where consumers must rely on the expertise of suppliers.¶

3. For example, if several papers on a certain topic, particularly papers by well-known economists, have appeared, that itself makes this topic seem important. Hence, even those referees who themselves find this topic uninteresting may be reluctant to reject further papers on it.¶

4. In Europe popular writing is more accepted by academics. The other part of communicating with the public, teaching, also receives little professional kudos.¶

5. Given the large number of popular magazines a one-day conference on how to find an appropriate outlet for various types of article, is a promising, relatively low-cost possibility, and so is a book about marketing economics articles and related issues.¶

6. A related problem is whether graduate training adequately prepares economists for service in government and business. On this issue see Colander and Brenner (1992).¶

7. I wonder what proportion of graduate students have even heard of post-Keynesian economics or Austrian economics. One need not be a fervent admirer of either one to believe that they may contain some useful ideas, so that students should at least know that they exist.

8. The argument of this paragraph is subject to two qualifications. First, for two reasons the market outcome need not be optimal. On the one hand, publishing additional books or papers increases variety, and thus generates consumer surplus. On the other hand, it reduces sales of existing books, and since publishing is a decreasing cost industry this is undesirable. The second qualification is that cutting library subscriptions would reduce economists' productivity, and this would be reflected only

to some extent (probably only to a small extent) in their salaries. But it seems likely that even if it were fully reflected economists would accept the offer.¶

9. George Akerlof's difficulty in publishing some of his pathbreaking papers is a case in point. Whether these cases show a systemic bias against innovative work, or whether there are just as many examples of innovative but bad papers that were published, but should not have been, is a matter of judgment.¶
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