Quantity *versus* Quality: What's in a (Journal) Name?

David E. Giles

Department of Economics, University of Victoria
Victoria, B.C., Canada V8W 2Y2

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Abstract

We consider the relationship between the rankings and the title length of 159 academic economics journals. Although there is no significant association between these two metrics for the full sample of data, we find that a significant "bathtub" relationship between journal quality and title length emerges when the data are subjected to a rank correlation analysis over sub-samples.

Author Contact:
David E. Giles, Dept. of Economics, University of Victoria, P.O. Box 1700, STN CSC, Victoria, B.C., Canada V8W 2Y2; e-mail: dgiles@uvic.ca; Phone: (250) 721-8540; FAX: (250) 721-6214

1.   Introduction

"Less is More" - Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

Some of the most influential academic journals have very short titles. To wit, *Science*, *Nature*, *Physica, Biometrika*, *Geology*, *Circulation*, *Polyhedron*, *Endoscopy*, *Neuron*, and *Econometrica*. What, if anything, should we conclude from this observation? Recently, Schreuder and Oosterveld (2008) investigated the relationship between the rankings of 6,033 journals in a wide range of scientific disciplines, and the length of those journals' titles. For their sample as a whole, and for journals in only five of the disciplinary groupings that they considered, these authors found a significant negative correlation between the journals' impact factors and the number of characters in their title. The converse result was obtained for the "Pediatrics" and "Urology and Nephrology" fields. The importance of analyzing such data from different disciplines separately is underscored by the following observations of Althouse *et al.* (2009): in 2006 the average (highest) impact factor for economics journals was 0.8 (4.7), compared with 4.8 (47.4) in molecular and cell biology.

In this paper we show that, in overall terms, there is no significant correlation between the length of economics journals' titles and their perceived quality by the profession. However, for the highest quality journals, we find that "less is significantly more" when it comes to a name; and the converse it true for the group of least influential journals. This leads us to offer some light-hearted suggestions for publishers, editors and budding authors in this discipline.


2.   Analysis of economics journals

The rankings of the top 159 economics journals are provided in Table 1 of Kalaitzidakis *et al.* (2003), and are derived from 1998 citations of articles published in the period 1994 to 1998, with self-citations excluded and adjustments for both impact and page size. Unfortunately, certain well-known journals (*e.g.*, *Journal of Finance*, and *Econometric Reviews*) are excluded from the rankings for reasons explained by Kalaitzidakis *et al.* (2003, p.1348). In addition, given the time-frame for the sample, many recent journals such as the various Berkeley Electronic Press publications, and *Econometrics Journal*, are also omitted from the analysis.

Our primary measure of journal's title length is the number of characters (including embedded blanks), but none of our results change qualitatively when length is measured in terms of the number of words.[1] Title lengths range from 6 characters (*Kyklos*: ranking = 81) to 68 characters

(*Journal of Economics-Zeitschrift für Volkwirtshaft und Socialpolitik*: ranking = 66), with mean, median and modal values of 29, 28 and 26 respectively.[2] Figure 1 shows a scatter-plot of the data, with a Nadaraya-Watson non-parametric fit using the Epanechnikov kernel, and a least squares linear fit.[3] The first impression is that there is no relationship between title length and ranking – the slope of the linear regression line is -0.2331 ($p = 0.454$).[4] However, the kernel fit hints of a possible dependency whose sign may depend on the range of the data.

Figure 1: Scatter-plot (full sample)
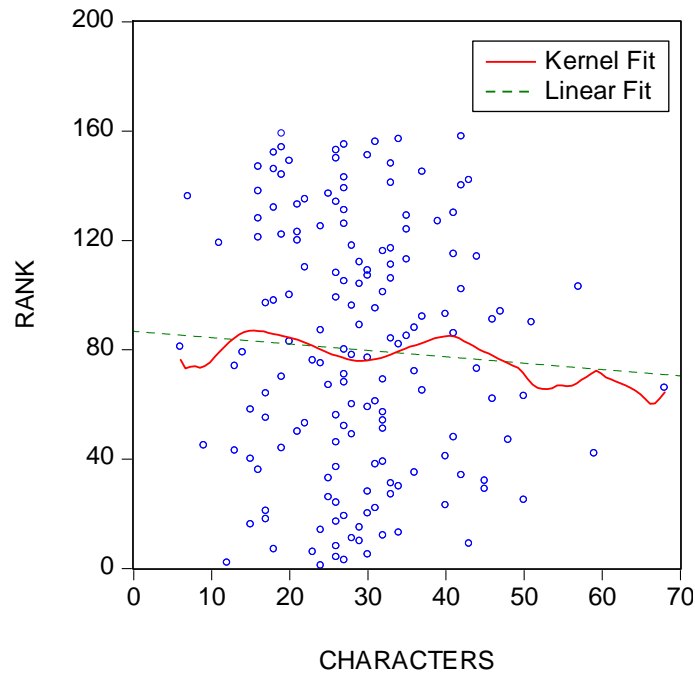
In the following discussion one should keep in mind that journals with the *lowest* ranking values (*e.g.*, 1, 2, 3…) are those with the *highest* perceived quality. Table 1 provides a rank correlation analysis using both Kendall's tau and Spearman's rho statistics, with proper account being taken of the many "ties" in the data for title length. As well as the full sample of data, several sub-samples have been considered, based on both the rankings and the characters data. As anticipated from Figure 1, the signs of the correlations vary by sub-sample, and in general they are not significantly different from zero. However, for the "top 40" journals there is a significant positive rank correlation between journal ranking and title length. For this group, the better journals tend to have shorter titles, consistent with the general finding of Schreuder and Oosterveld (2008).[5] The same result emerges for the 36 journals with the shortest titles (*i.e.*, 6 to 20 characters). In the case of the lowest quality journals – those ranked below the "top 100" - there is a significant

negative rank correlation between journal impact and title length. For this group, the better journals tend to have significantly *longer* titles. The same conclusion is reached by considering the group of 24 journals with the longest titles.[6]

Table 1: Rank correlation analysis

	Ranking *vs.* Characters			Characters *vs.* Ranking		
Rankings	**Kendall's** τ_b	**Spearman's** ρ	**Characters** [*n*]	**Kendall's** τ_b	**Spearman's** ρ
1 - 159	-0.0202 (0.71)	-0.0348 (0.66)	6 - 68 [159]	-0.0202 (0.71)	-0.0348 (0.66)
1 - 20	0.1233 (0.47)	0.1712 (0.47)	6 - 20 [35]	0.2410 (0.05)	0.3603 (0.03)
1 - 40	0.2032 (0.07)	0.2829 (0.08)	15 - 30 [88]	-0.0882 (0.24)	-0.1274 (0.24)
21 - 50	-0.0951 (0.48)	-0.1450 (0.45)	21 - 30 [61]	-0.0389 (0.68)	-0.0572 (0.66)
51 - 100	0.0486 (0.63)	0.0620 (0.67)	31 - 40 [39]	0.0948 (0.43)	0.1254 (0.45)
101 - 140	-0.2489 (0.03)	-0.3839 (0.02)	31 - 68 [63]	-0.0026 (0.98)	-0.0106 (0.93)
101 - 159	-0.1482 (0.10)	-0.2318 (0.08)	41 - 68 [24]	-0.2132 (0.16)	-0.3305 (0.12)

Note: 2-sided *p*-values appear in parentheses. Sub-sample sizes appear in square brackets.

3. Some modest conclusions

While being careful not to confuse correlation with causality, our results point to a "U-curve", or perhaps more correctly, a "bathtub" relationship between economics journal title length and perceived quality. While not apparent at the aggregate data level, this relationship emerges when sub-samples of the data are subjected to a grueling rank correlation analysis. This finding does not have the import of the Kuznets' curve or its environmental counterpart, but it is sure to attract the interest of authors and editors seeking to maximize their citations, and departments wishing to raise their profile in the profession and their funding base.

This "bathtub" relationship will undoubtedly sound alarm bells in the corridors of publishing houses as they assess proposals for new economics journals. The title, *Economics*, is no longer available, having been cunningly snapped up in recent years by an open-access, open-assessment e-journal which managed to "cover all of the bases" in one fell swoop. Even more recently the American Economics Association laid claim to the titles *Macroeconomics* and *Microeconomics*, albeit with an "AEA" prefix that they may wish to re-consider. The publishers of the journal, *SERIEs: Journal of the Spanish Economic Association*, which was launched in 2010, will no doubt ponder the merits of dropping the last six words of its title. However, there is hope. The title *Econometrica* has been spoken for since 1933, but to the best of our knowledge the more worldly journal title *Econometrics* is still available. Publishers should register their interest forthwith!

Finally, and in the tradition of concluding academic papers with some conjectures regarding future research, one obvious extension of this paper is to undertake a similar analysis of individual article title lengths, numbers of co-authors and citation rates. The author does not claim any precedence regarding this suggestion.

References

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Footnotes

1.   The Pearson correlation between the number of characters and the number of words is 0.903 ($p = 0.000$). There are four journals with one-word titles (ranks in parentheses): *Econometrica* (2), *Economica* (45), *Kyklos* (81) and *Futures* (136). One journal has an eight-word title: *Journal of Economics - Zeitschrift für Volkwirtshaft und Socialpolitik* (66). The mean (median) number of words in a title is 3.8 (4.0). Our results based on word (rather than character) counts are available on request

2.   The distribution of characters has a skewness coefficient of 0.603, and excess kurtosis of 0.864. The process of character counting was simplified by using the web-based tool accessed at http://allworldphone.com/count-words-characters.htm .

3.   All of the computations were undertaken using the EViews 7.1 package (Quantitative Micro Software, 2010).

4.   White's heteroskedasticity-consistent estimator of the covariance matrix is used throughout this paper.

5.   Note that the top-ranked journal has the *smallest* ranking (1), and this corresponds to the *largest* impact factor in the Schreuder and Oosterveld (2008) study.

6.   Note that the *p*-values reported in Table 1 are for a *two-sided* alternative hypothesis.