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ECONOMICS IN PRACTICE

The Internet and the Structure of Discourse: The Websites of Economists at Harvard and George Mason

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ABSTRACT

[E]conomic ideas – ranging from new but unelaborated concepts through isolated propositions about causality, all the way to full-blown theories – arise in the highbrow part of the economics profession and then diffuse first within the profession and then sometimes outside it to journalists, bureaucrats, politicians, and other citizens.

– Robert Solow (1989, 75)

Robert Nelson (2004) draws on theology and religious history to distinguish “scholasticism” and “pietism.” In the scholastic approach “a church hierarchy interprets the ways of God to the faithful. An official priesthood transmits the results of a long history of internal church discussions and debates.” In the pietistic view “there is a more direct relationship between the individual and God. Protestantism in general preaches that salvation is ‘by faith alone’ – without any essential intermediary role for a church hierarchy” (474). Nelson uses the terms to characterize two approaches in economics. He analyzes the words of many prominent economists, notably the retrospectives in the centennial issue of the *Economic Journal*, and argues that the analogy fits a tension within the economics profession. As signaled by the opening quotation by Robert Solow (which is also used by Nelson), scholastics are more concerned with speaking to each other, distilling results, and passing them down through intermediaries to the laity. Pietistic figures are more interested in speaking directly to the

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everyman. They see themselves, not as the representative of an exalted priesthood, but as a facilitator or prompter of direct access to important truths and insights.

In the matter of scholasticism vs. pietism, Nelson usefully distinguishes between *structural* and *topical*. The structural refers to the way that discourse is structured. The image of structural scholasticism is typified by the vision given by Solow in the opening quotation: “highbrow” elites at the apex of a pyramid. Structural features give rise to and authorize *topical* features. Scholastic structure gives rise to and authorizes exclusive discourse and “scholastic” refinements, in the dictionary sense of “scholastic.” Nelson suggests that mathematics is the new Latin (476). Likewise, pietistic structure gives rise to public discourse in the vernacular.¹

If one wanted to pursue Nelson’s distinction in an empirical fashion, it is plain where to look for scholasticism: “The official keepers of the faith of the new ‘church’ of this modern scholasticism are found in the leading university departments of economics and at the ‘top’ journals (which are almost always edited at one of the elite departments)” (476). The National Research Council and other sources rank Harvard the number one economics department among research universities.² Harvard economists edit *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, consistently ranked a top economics journal.

As for the pietistic, Nelson writes:

Organizations such as the Foundation for Economic Education, the Cato Institute, and the Institute for Economics Affairs do not appeal to priestly authority, and do not lobby the powers that be to impose their doctrines on others (they oppose the government production of schooling). They appeal to the common understandings of interested lay observers (477).

An economics department known to have such an orientation is that at George Mason University. In fact, many professors at GMU have worked much with think tanks and other “pietistic” operations. What typifies the work of many of such organizations is not merely policy advocacy, but also a kind of economic instruction that has been described as “homiletic” (Doherty 2007, 156). (The first definition of *homily* given by the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed.) is: “A sermon, especially one intended to edify a congregation on a practical matter and not intended to be a theological discourse.”)

Nelson (2004) says that pietistic economic organizations tend to favor the free market. He writes:

The three examples given are libertarian examples, and certainly other examples from other ideological quarters could be given. However, we

¹ In the topical dimension, Nelson’s scholastic-pietistic tension directly parallels the scholastic-public discourse tension set out in Klein (2001).

² A complete ranking list can be viewed at Joseph Newton’s website. [Link](#). Harvard is ranked number one in “[a] recent ranking of economics departments by publications in the top 30 research journals,” calculated between 1995 and 1999 (Kalaitzidakis et al 2003). Also, in the *US News* ranking (2005), Harvard also scores among the top five schools to obtain an economics PhD.

would argue that the more mainstream “liberal” and conservative organizations and periodicals tend to approach issues politically rather than economically; they appeal more to the sporting nature of the political contest. As for the leftist periodicals outside the center, we would argue that their emphasis on elucidating economic principles is very weak. Thus, in endeavors of economic pietism, I see a certain prominence to libertarian ideas (477).

We have not made an independent assessment of pietistic economic organizations and publications, and, although there are clear counter-examples such as the Economic Policy Institute, *Challenge* magazine, and Brad DeLong's *Semi-Daily Journal*, it seems to us that there is some truth to Nelson's observation.³ Accordingly, in as much as free-market thinking is typical of pietistic economics, pietism is again well represented by the George Mason department, where most members are exceptionally supportive of economic liberalizations.

The various impressions suggest that there is reason to characterize Harvard as relatively scholastic and George Mason as relatively pietistic. We investigate economists' websites to detect signs of such a contrast.

THE INTERNET AND THE STRUCTURE OF DISCOURSE

Nelson (2004) also describes a change in economic thought. The profession began as pietistic and has become more scholastic. Adam Smith stands as an example of the pietistic origins of political economy—Jacob Viner (1927, 218) described *The Wealth of Nations* as “a tract for the times.” Smith's audience stretched far beyond the academy. Moreover, Smith was critical of academic scholasticism (1776: 760-781). Since Smith's time the gap between the “highbrows” and the everyman has grown, partly or perhaps mainly because of what Nelson calls “structural scholasticism.” Part of our motivation here is to ask whether the gap is being reduced by technological advancements and the Internet. Will the Internet alter the structure of economic discourse? Will it bring greater professional standing to policy advocacy and economic homiletics?

It is our impression that blogs and the Internet have attracted new audiences to economic research. Notable among the economics blogs are four maintained by economists in our “sample”: *Greg Mankiw's Blog*, *Marginal Revolution* (Tyler Cowen and Alexander Tabarrok), *Econlog* (Bryan Caplan and Arnold Kling), and *Café Hayek* (Donald Boudreaux and Russell Roberts). Almost daily they discuss economic ideas and research. *Café Hayek* excels in economic homiletics—the illumination of key insights and verities with a variety of illustrations.

³ For online directories of hundreds of free-market policy organizations in the United States, see the State Policy Network's directory ([Link](#)) and, worldwide, the Atlas Economic Research Foundation think tank directory ([Link](#)).

Lay economic interest seems to be expanding with the capacity to navigate and find material on the web. Until recently, accessing research required library privileges, photocopying, and a lot of schlepping. Collecting the publication records of economists was very costly – a researcher had to contact each individual through the mail or fax. Access to biographical information is a major benefit rendered by the Internet. Nowadays there is Wikipedia and a growing openness about where one is coming from (Klein 2006). Discourse is plainer, more candid, more natural—just as the pietistic churches abandoned Latin and used the vernacular.

The Internet also empowers writing. Anyone can criticize anyone. If people find your stream of commentary and criticism useful or insightful, you will have readers. Even bloggers who do not attract many readers learn by doing; they learn some economics by writing about economic issues. It seems to us that the Internet has made economic discourse more contestable and more equitable, as well as more fragmented.

Scholastic endeavors also gain. Improved communications facilitate the gathering of research materials and collaboration between authors (Hamermesh and Oster 2002; Kim et al 2006).

We wanted to see how the two character types, scholastic and pietistic, use the Internet to formulate and distribute their ideas. Are economists embracing accessibility and transparency by hosting their information and publication records on the web? Are they posting articles for lay readers? Are they using the Internet to communicate what they consider to be the important things? How accessible is the thought of those in the relatively scholastic department compared to those in the relatively pietistic department?

To avoid possible misunderstanding, we should say that this investigation is not intended as criticism of Harvard. Yes, we would like to see academic economics move in the pietistic direction, and we are partial to GMU, our home institution, but, like Adam Smith (1776, 761f), we recognize that quality control within academia necessitates a significant degree of scholasticism, that the tension is one of marginal conditions, not corner solutions. The tension is inevitable—which is demonstrated in the way major Protestant religions evolved into scholastic hierarchies (Nelson 2004, 475). This investigation is a comparison of web utilization by the two departments, with the Nelson distinction providing motivation and framing.

WHAT AND HOW WE COUNTED

We restricted ourselves to gathering data from the web. Starting from the Harvard economics department homepage, we visited each faculty members⁴ website in full⁵,

⁴To remain faithful to the faculty lists as they appeared on the two websites, we included the following 9 visiting professors as Harvard Economics faculty: Yu-Chin Chen, Kenneth Hendricks, Guido Imbens, Elena Krasnokutskaya, Jeffrey Miron, Andrew Postlewaite, Geert Ridder, Roberto Rigobon, and Kenneth Sokoloff. The GMU Economics website did not include any visiting professors but did include one instructor, Thomas Rustici, whom we included.

⁵By “in full” we mean that we counted as available all materials to which one could access by “drilling down” from the individual’s departmental website.

during late 2005 and continuing through late 2006.⁶ We printed out each faculty member's curriculum vitae (CV), when available, tallied their publications, and compared the tallies with the number of publications available for download. The same process was then performed for the GMU faculty. (We did not “tip off” GMU faculty members—in fact, we kept the investigation secret.) Before completing the investigation, we checked for any CV and website changes as of December 1, 2006 so all data, for both departments, speaks for the situation as of late 2006.

We wanted to sort publications by type. The ideal would have been to create a categorization that separates scholastic from public-discourse. Unfortunately, we found that such a categorization would have required investigation of each individual publication and a judgment on our part of whether a particular article or book chapter was intended for a general audience. Instead, we opted for a cruder categorization based on how scholars tend to organize their CVs:

Peer-Reviewed Articles (PRA) are articles accepted or published by a peer-reviewed journal. “Peer-review” itself speaks of a scholastic emphasis. We count a publication as peer-reviewed based on the way the faculty member categorizes it in his or her CV or website. We realize that there is great heterogeneity in the journals where these publications are placed, and that the Harvard economists get into more prestigious journals. In no way are we trying to adjust for quality.

Working Papers (WP) are papers listed on CVs in any stage other than accepted/published,⁷ and can generally be thought of as preliminary drafts of what will become peer-review articles.

Other Publications (OP) include a variety of material, including books (written or edited), book chapters, short notes, policy studies, and articles for the general reader.⁸ Admittedly, these are a mixed bag, but all, even the few comparable to a chapter in *Handbook of Game Theory*, are generally more oriented toward the general reader than what that economist publishes in refereed journals. Most of these publications are oriented toward the general reader much more so than the typical peer-reviewed journal article.

The Appendix at the end of this article links to an Excel file that contains our counts. The final counts of publications listed on the CVs appear on the left side of worksheets A and B. The same system was used to keep track of publications available for download (either on the original or a linked website), reported in the right side of the worksheets.

⁶ The time spread was needed to find, print, count, and record the data. By the time we had printed and counted the publications for economists low on the alphabetical list, a few professors had updated their CVs. Double-checking in December 2006 was our way of bringing the data to a moment in time.

⁷ Some scholars separated complete (but unpublished) working papers, from incomplete research. Our counting system counts them as the same. Worksheets E and F list how each professor characterized the works we counted as “Working Papers.”

⁸ In the linked appendix, worksheets C and D list how each professor characterized the works we counted as “Other Publications.”

WHAT WE FOUND

Relative Proportions of “Scholastic” to “Pietistic” Writings

To make clear what we are doing, we first present a table of raw numbers, but we will quickly move past it. That initial table is Table 1, below, which naively reports counts using only the available CVs and websites in the two departments (the data is contained in worksheets A and B).

Table 1: Publication counts and percentages by type, based on information found in online CVs and website

	Harvard Economics		GMU Economics	
Peer-review articles (PRA)	3722	68.08%	1203	37.79%
Working papers (WP)	472	8.63%	147	4.62%
Other pubs (OP)	1273	23.29%	1833	57.59%
Total pubs (TP)	5467	100%	3183	100%

Next, to get a handle on the individual’s actual production in each category, we took the *higher* of: (1) tallies from the CV, and (2) tallies of items available for download. These adjustments deliver Table 2, which we think give better proxies of proportions of publication types (worksheets G and H report the tabulation).

Table 2 (which does not control for department size) indicates that Harvard focuses on peer-reviewed articles and working papers, together making 77 percent of their total publications. In contrast, for George Mason, it is Other Publications that predominate, making up 63 percent of their total publications.

Next we estimate figures “per capita,” and that entails further manipulations of the capita numbers. For PRAs, it makes no sense to proceed as though a professor with no CV or website has zero. Thus, we threw out professors who had neither an available CV nor an online listing of publications. We also threw out individuals who did not provide a CV and had suspiciously low quantities of publications (for example older and fully tenured faculty without a list of publications nor a CV available), leaving us to conclude that there was no information about their real record of PRAs (see worksheet I for a listing of the excluded professors from each department). For Other Publications and Working Papers, however, we did not throw anyone out; that is, included professors who had zeros, because for those publication categories it is more plausible that their lack of reporting represents a true absence of such work.

Table 2: Proxy publication counts and percentages by type, based on online CVs and websites

	Harvard Economics		GMU Economics	
Peer-review articles (PRA)	3734	64.46%	1219	32.94%
Working papers (WP)	733	12.65%	132	3.57%
Other pubs (OP)	1326	22.89%	2350	63.50%
Total pubs (TP)	5793	100%	3701	100%

The manipulations described in the previous paragraph worked out as follows: The denominator for Harvard's mean PRA was 60 (70 minus the 10 excluded faculty listed in worksheet I). The same 60 economists are used to identify the median PRA. The denominator for GMU's mean PRA was 19 (31 minus the 12 excluded faculty listed in worksheet I). The remaining 19 economists are used to identify the median PRA. For the OP and WP means and medians the full departments were included (70 for Harvard and 31 for GMU).

Table 3 reports the means and medians as described above for each department:

Pietism calls for wide dissemination and repetition of basic insights, and at GMU we observe a high number of "Other Publications" per capita.⁹ Scholasticism, in principle, can justify the concentration of attention on a small number of seminal works, the ideas of which are then absorbed and disseminated by others throughout the scholastic hierarchy.

Relative proportions appear in bold in the bottom row of Table 3. They reflect the characters of the two departments. We should emphasize, however, that neither department is all one type: Harvard produces a great deal of "Other Publications" and GMU produces a great deal of work for peer-review.

The numbers should not be taken too seriously. For example, they do not attempt to adjust for any difference in the age profile across the two departments. Also, it should be noted that means and medians differ greatly because "sluggers" pull up the mean. For example, for the George Mason calculation of mean Other Publications, James Buchanan has 529, Gordon Tullock has 440, and Walter Williams has 518. Finally, the proxies necessarily understate actual publications, since CVs and download inventories can only understate actual achievements, so these proxies are not to be taken as estimates of actual publications.

⁹ One might suspect that by not throwing out individuals with zeros for Other Publications, the procedure is biased in favor of GMU, which generally uses the web more than Harvard. In fact, the percent of faculty with zero Other Publications in this calculus is higher for GMU than Harvard, so we doubt a pro-GMU bias in the OP per capita calculation. In other words, throwing out the OP zeros would *help* GMU relative to Harvard.

Table 3: Proxy publication types “per capita”: means and medians

	Harvard Economics		GMU Economics	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Peer-Review Arts	62.2	38.5	64.2	35
Working Papers	10.5	7	4.3	0
Other Pubs	18.9	5	75.8	19
Total Pubs	82.8	52	119.4	50
OP: (PRA + WP)	0.3	0.1	1.1	0.5

EXTENT OF WEB UTILIZATION

The data also indicate that George Mason’s pietistic quality has led it to exploit the Internet as a communication medium. The following table is about whether material is available for download, and hence does not throw anyone out of the tally.

In Table 4 George Mason outpaces Harvard’s mean usage of the Internet on all margins except for working papers.

Table 4: How much do the departments use the web?

	Harvard Economics		GMU Economics	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
PRA on the web	9.8	4.5	11.1	0
WP on the web	8.7	5	1.5	0
OP on the web	4.4	0	28.16	1
TP on the web	22.9	11.5	40.7	9

Table 5: Ratios of web-available publications to proxy publications

	Harvard Economics	GMU Economics
Total available PRA: Total proxy PRA	0.18	0.28
Mean available PRA: Mean proxy PRA	0.16	0.17
Median available PRA: Median proxy PRA	0.01	0.00
Total available WP: Total proxy WP	0.83	0.35
Mean available WP: Mean proxy WP	0.83	0.33
Median available WP: Median proxy WP	0.71	0.00
Total available OP: Total proxy OP	0.23	0.37
Mean available OP: Mean proxy OP	0.23	0.37
Median available OP: Median proxy OP	0.00	0.05
Total available TP: Total proxy TP	0.28	0.34
Mean available TP: Mean proxy TP	0.28	0.35
Median available TP: Median proxy TP	0.22	0.18

It seems natural to compare the two previous sets of data: proxy publication levels and how extensively each department uses the net. Table 5 makes comparisons between the content actually available on the web (recorded in the right-side columns of worksheets A and B) with our publications estimates from Table 3. The results suggest that, except for working papers, GMU leads slightly in making its material available for download on the Internet.

BLOGS

Again, the blogosphere allows for almost any motivated writer or thinker to speak to dozens or even thousands of readers. The “Comments” function at a blog enables readers to speak back and be heard. The blogging efforts of the two departments are summarized in Table 6.

Harvard’s Gregory Mankiw runs the only blog of his department, while George Mason’s faculty members contribute to seven active blogs. (After the moment of investigation, Harvard’s Dani Rodrik started a blog.)

Table 6: Blogging in Each Department

Harvard University	Contributors
1 Greg Mankiw's Blog http://gregmankiw.blogspot.com/	Gregory Mankiw
George Mason University	Contributors
1 The Austrian Economists http://austrianeconomists.typepad.com	Peter Boettke plus three others*
2 Café Hayek http://cafehaye.typepad.com/hayek	Donald Boudreaux Russell Roberts
3 EconLog http://econlog.econlib.org	Bryan Caplan Arnold Kling*
4 Marginal Revolution http://www.marginalrevolution.com/	Tyler Cowen Alexander Tabarrok
5 Neuroeconomics http://neuroeconomics.typepad.com/	Kevin McCabe plus five others*
6 Overcoming Bias http://www.overcomingbias.com	Robin Hanson plus 35 others*
7 Tyler Cowen Ethnic Dining Guide http://www.tylercowensethnicediningguide.com	Tyler Cowen

**not a faculty member*

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is natural to look to the Harvard department, the apex of the economics pyramid, for exemplification of the scholastic approach. George Mason, on the other hand, has an unusual emphasis in policy discourse and economic homiletics. Taking those two departments as representative of “scholastic” and “pietistic,” a comparison of website usage reflects the character of each. Harvard economists are clearly devoted to publishing in peer-reviewed, scholastic forums leaving them relatively less time to pursue other publications. Their web presence reflects this preference as it puts striking emphasis on sharing current working papers. George Mason reveals a preference for

reaching audiences outside of the academy and into the laity. They publish extensively in alternative outlets and make a fuller use of the web to share their ideas and research.

The Internet serves as a powerful tool in generating and disseminating economic ideas. Measured web activity is a metric that can help us locate a department's character on the scholastic-pietistic continuum.

APPENDIX

Excel file containing the data, in the following worksheets. [Link](#)

Worksheet A: Harvard University Department of Economics

Worksheet B: George Mason University Department of Economics

Worksheet C: Harvard University's Other Publications (OP)

Worksheet D: George Mason University's Other Publications (OP)

Worksheet E: Harvard University's Working Papers (WP)

Worksheet F: George Mason University's Working Papers (WP)

Worksheet G: Harvard University's proxy publication counts.

Worksheet H: George Mason University proxy publication counts.

Worksheet I: Faculty excluded from PRA mean and median calculations.

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