

The new Qualis, which has nothing to do with the science of Brazil. Open letter to the president of CAPES

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Professor Doutor Jorge Guimarães
DD Presidente, CAPES
São Paulo, August 2, 2009.

Dear Jorge

You have probably seen the New Qualis, which is being the hot topic of the moment, haven't you? It had actually an excellent article published in the "O Estado de São Paulo" under the suggestive title 'Ranking puts Brazilian scientific journals at risk of extinction' [1]. In an interview, you quoted 'not agreeing with some changes such as the restriction on the number of journals that can be classified in a specific area.' Viva! Mr. President has started to see the problem! Unfortunately you used a criticizing tone extremely mild, in order to minimize, merely as a detail, this which is the meanest intention of the Committee of Alienated Numerologists (CNA). Forgive me, but I've made up this acronym because acronyms are in vogue and also because I refuse to recall the official name of this Committee. As for the decision of only 25% of the journals in the world are worthy to enter Qualis A, the Alienated established, perhaps unnoticeably, this curious and inevitable mathematical consequence: the limit for each area was established by numerology, with no relation whatsoever with the reality of the respective scientific production. Just one example: in Medicine I, the limit impact factor is 3.7 because 25% of the world magazines in the subject categories of JCR included in Medicina I have the impact factor ≥ 3.7 . What about the relation with Brazilian scientific production in Medicine I? None! As a matter of fact, those who actually get to read the basic document of the CNA will be able to confirm the total lack of preoccupation regarding this "insignificance". This fact is so important that it becomes necessary to emphasize. Through this arbitrary numerology the Alienated Gentlemen have created a table that is good for Afghanistan, Haiti, U.S.A., Switzerland, and Rhuanda. Also for Mars, Jupiter or Neptune. Or just in case we freak out and decide to go on a Helenistic buff frenzy, to Ares, Zeus and Poseidon! In other

words, it is good for no one! It is just a fetiche! To the Best of my knowledge, as they say, nobody had disclosed this aspect of the New Qualis. If you prefer a technical position, here we go: the construction base of the Qualis A is methodologically vicious: it is almost a statistical impossibility ($P < 10^{-50}$, something like the probability of going wrong in the hypothetical basketball match further illustrated) that the first quartile of the periodicals of EACH of the SUBJECT CATEGORIES of the ISI might be the adequate limit for EACH ONE of the areas of Brazilian science. But not all is lost, for we have gotten an important ally: we welcome you with open arms, dear Mr. President, to play in our team. Maybe even being our captain: Like in our good old-school times, let's hit the street holding a banner with a good slogan reading: "DOWN WITH THE NEW QUALIS! BRING BACK REALISM!"

But the problem does not run out in this alienated numerology! No one argues that the old Qualis is outdated and it is necessary to create a new type of rating for Brazilian scientific publications. Excuse me for repeating something that you have proudly quoted, our science has grown considerably in quality and geometrically in quality. And I would like to add that when it comes to quality, we are the Number One of BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China). In quantity; the Number Four. But when comparing our quality with those of the First World, there is still a long way to go. We publish more than Switzerland, but the quality falls way behind. How do we measure these things? The old Qualis used the Impact Factor as a quality rating, because there was no choice: at that time there was the only available rating mean. And if to our eyes in 2009, the old Qualis looks low we need to remember that it was realistic when it was first created. And because it was realistic it was reachable. And there is why it did not distort the evaluation. On the contrary, it contributed to increase the quality of the Brazilian science, and that we owe to CAPES! Thank you and your pals! But in this new millennium, there are new ratings. And the technologic information is light-years ahead of the times of the old Qualis. And here is the second major problem of the new Qualis: the evaluation of Brazilian

scientific production is confined in the straight-jacket of a single and disputable criterion, the Impact Factor of the JCR. Talking about new ratings, what can we say about the “metro” of the Scopus, that includes almost twice as much of the publications covered by the ISI? And the Factor H, that has limitations, but can be corrected? But no! The Alienated assigned to a computer located in Philadelphia the evaluation of our science. As a gesture of intellectual servility it would be bad enough! But the worst thing is that the owner of the computer, The Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) is sick and tired of warning: the computer of the JCR has never been programmed to evaluate individual scientific works, but instead, scientific publications. Impact factor does not guarantee that the article “A” will be published in the periodic “X”, with Impact Factor “N” has quality assured by the Impact Factor “N”. Much worse: that aforementioned servility gesture to the good old Yankee ideologic imperialism totally eliminated human intelligence from any participation in the process of evaluating the Brazilian science! The question is: was it convenience (the computer does everything and we rest) or was it ignorance (we didn’t even think about it)?

The third problem is about the organization of the postgraduation area of Qualis. I have already analyzed it in detail [2], but it is worthy to sum it up here. Each area of CAPES knowledge englobes a large array of subject categories of the JCR. Always using Medicine I as an example, there are included 15 subject categories (allergy, cardiology, clinical neurology, critical care medicine, endocrinology, gastroenterology, hematology, immunology, infectious diseases, nephrology, oncology, ophthalmology, respiratory system, rheumatology, and possibly one or more that escaped me) these categories have huge differences of Impact among them. The very own ISI have said it a zillion times; it is expressly prohibited comparing Impact Factors among different subject categories, because each one of them has its own intrinsic capacity of generating quotes. But our numerologists don’t give a damn! The consequence is as predictable as the result of the Dream Team vs. Losers! The areas with high inherent capacity of receiving citation, such as Oncology and Immunology, will pack up the highest levels of the Brazilian postgraduation. In the other end, areas with low inherent capacity, such as Nephrology and Ophthalmology will be disregarded to the lowest levels. But the question is: Are Oncology and Immunology elite science, while Nephrology and Ophthalmology are scum? Whenever you can, mate, ask the numerologists: the question is valid because I’m sure that, awkwardly, they didn’t even realize the extent of their mistake and, actually, believed in it: in their inner circle, I suppose that their little heads are nodding; on the other hand, in public their cynical tongues shout ‘No’! But as sure as the Dream Team would outplay his opponent, it is

also sure-fire that the new Qualis will make each area discriminate elite-type programs and scum-type programs. Also assured is that this segregation will have nothing to do with qualities or defects, but rather, solely with the respective inherent capacities of generating quotations. But, returning to the technical argument, Table 1 will prove what I’m saying:

Table 1. Impact Factor limit to 25% of the publications of the areas

Area	Impact for Qualis A
General Critical Impact for Medicine I	>3.70
Correct Critical Impact for Oncology	>4.53
Correct Critical Impact for Ophthalmology	>2.57

Therefore, by the very own and cheesy numerological methodology of the Alienated, Qualis A (Impact Factor > 3.7) it is highly permissive for Oncology (it should be 4.5), highly restrictive for Ophthalmology (it should be 2.5), as we wished to show! Whoever wants to repeat this operation for any area will prove the same thing, mutatis mutandi. But let’s leave this silly erudition aside and let’s get back to the sports metaphor. I claim and confirm that the new Qualis ‘cheats’ in favor of Oncology and ‘pickpockets’ from Ophthalmology (as you know, Jorge, I am not an oncologist or ophthalmologist). I simply got the ‘leader’ and the ‘usher’ from the ranking of Medicine I. I am not accusing anyone, except, of course, the Alienated; and only in order to try to keep this wacky game to be played. This is only the small accusation. The big one comes later. We can’t just simply disperse ourselves: let’s put our helmets and go to war! Be our captain, Jorge!

The fourth problem is regarding the Brazilian publications. Down here, the numerologists’ snobbism goes hand in hand with the corny longing for last century fancy fashion. The noble gentlemen learn publishing etiquette in the 60’s-80’s from their mentors (as I learned from old Mauricio!): publishing in a Brazilian journal was something ignorant and shameful! Nobody would read, nobody had access, etc. But it seems that these guys didn’t even realize that we are already in the 21st century. And, also here, Jorge, in science, the fancy fashion starts to change: in these first nine years, the download of articles from the SciELO collection boosted from less than half a million to almost 100 million/year. That’s right: our publication is read, today, two hundred times (twenty thousand percent!) more than in 2000! Don’t get me wrong, my friend! I don’t mean that south to the Tropic of Cancer we publish as good science as in the north. But this difference, which is real, does not exclude the existence of a Third-World anti-periodical viez. This viez can be defined in a few words: the impact

difference is way higher than the quality difference. Translating to the ear-piercing obvious: if an author could choose between citing similar quality articles, one from The New England Journal and another from Brazil Journal, generally he will pick the first one. This is valid for authors worldwide, including Brazilians. It is also valid even in cases when the Brazilian article is better than the New England's. Remember, my friend: as the ISI says, the high impact factor of the journal "X" does not guarantee that the article "A" will be good! But of course it is cooler to quote the New England than the Brazilian! After becoming editor I've hanging out somewhere else, Jorge. I always attend the Council for Science Editors of the U.S.A. And, even they acknowledge this fact: publications from the developing countries have less intrinsic impact than those of the First-world (just like Ophthalmology vs. Oncology, *mutatis mutandi*). And here we get to the big paradox that perils to turn to official schizophrenia: on history's way, as old Lenin would say, there's Federal Government, CNPq, CAPES support (a lot!) Brazilian publications. This year, CNPq and CAPES have transferred us R\$ 6,000,000.00 with excellent selection criteria. We are really thankful for that! Alright then, the Brazilian publications sheerly developing, the merging of CNPq-CAPES-SciELO the perfect match. But now the alienated numerologists escaped by the wrong way of history and declared: it is expressly prohibited to publish Brazilian publications! Those who commit the violation will be mercilessly punished being downgraded from their post graduation area. That is what creates the risk of extinction that's mentioned by 'O Estado de Sao Paulo'. Also brutally slashes the work of SciELO. Yes indeed, SciELO, who is a role-model to the world! Is this what we want, Jorge?

Risking it all for defending the preservation of the promising Brazilian publications, I will repeat what I have written and said (before the Council for Science Editors): a good collection of autochthonous publications is, increasingly, imperative for the national scientific sovereignty. Nations who do not possess them will depend on the First-World goodwill to have the chance to publish them. I mean, it will remain very difficult to publish something that does not interest those up there; and even more difficult will be to publish what really interests those up there that is better to save it all up and just let our old friends win the race. We all know that this always happens! Guglielmo Marconi established an Italian Journal of Physics when he realized that those in the north of Europe would 'blood suck' his findings. Hell yeah, Jorge: if only the Alienated didn't come into scene, in no time we would have acceptable publications even for our major 'brains'! I am, indeed, formally accusing the numerologists of *lèse-majesté* against our country. I know it is corny, but I'm getting cornier every day!

What else can/must be done, besides removing Qualis from the surrealism it's been put: surrealism, in this case (your own words, Jorge) is limiting 'the number the number of publications that can be classified in a specific stratum' [1]? Besides, eliminating Qualis, what else can we do to protect Brazilian journals? The answer is obvious, even because, it has already been used by CAPES in the past: we need "subsidies" for national publications, a "discount" in the Critical Impact Factor. Something around 40% according the current values of quails in Medicine. Why 40%? It is an empiric and operational value, which I came through serial estimations, with no pre-conditions. Consequently I'm sure that is way better than the CAN fetish. With 40% discount, 'Qualis A2' for Medicine 1, 2 and 3 is altered as shown in Table 2. For comparison, Table 3 shows JCR Impact Factors of the five major Brazilian journals in the year 2008 [3]:

Table 2. Qualis A2 with 40% discount

Area	Qualis A2 "full"	Qualis A2 com 40% "discount"
MEDICINE 1	3.700	2.220
MEDICINE 2	2.300	1.380
MEDICINE 3	1.800	1.080

Table 3. JCR Impact Factors of the five major Brazilian Publications in 2008

Journal	Impact Factor
1. Memórias Instituto Oswaldo Cruz:	1.450
2. Journal Brazil Chemical Society:	1.430
3. Revista Brasileira Psiquiatria	1.318
4. Brazilian Journal Medical Biological Research	1.215
5. Revista Saúde Pública	0.963

Repeated to other areas of knowledge this exercise will give similar results. Even with this "discount", only 4 Brazilian publications have achieved today Qualis A2 and only for Medicine 2 and 3. As you can see, I don't propose that we consider the slot. But this "small" opening would bring a humongous advantage: when old Qualis was established no Brazilian publication had enough impact to be Qualis International A. but the values back then created a feasible horizon. In the middle term, many publications got there, with good advantages for the Brazilian science and publications. The way it is, the new table offers no feasible horizon! With 40% discount some publications have already achieved the Qualis A2 and many more can also do it!

Almost concluding, my friend, allow me to criticize one of your quotations to "O Estado de Sao Paulo": When commenting the complaints of society, you said that 'they

are complaining about themselves' [1]. The new Qualis 'was a decision of the pairs, not the Directory (of CAPES)' [1]. But, please, mate Jorge, you know better: deciding by pairs is a valued decision. The new Qualis is not a valued decision! It is a political decision! Before its promulgation, it should have been discussed by society. Tolerate the debate now, but state (your own words, Jorge) that 'we will not change the criteria, because there's no need' [1] is a wicked way of democratic centralism. If we stay this way, there's nothing left to do but wait for the impact of the meteor "New Qualis" over the Brazilian science! Over the Brazilian publications! And, after the impact, think about what to do with the debris! But fortunately, there is still time: it is crucial to start discussing big time, in the community, not only among the inside public, on how to deviate the meteor's route.

Forgive me for this letter being so lengthy but I could not develop rationally my complete argument in a few words. I will conclude in a brief note:

Perhaps, my dear Jorge, you could imitate what happened on Sunday, June 26, in Belgrade, during the final of the World League of Volleyball. When the referee, a kind Dutchman, made a grotesque mistake, the table of referees, exceeding from his attributions, did something that I, long-time fan of volleyball, have never seen. They called on the guy and plainly gave him the political order: change your decision, because we cannot bear this mistake! Well, let me tell you what: It worked! The guy went back to his seat and changed his decision! As crazy as it sounds, my dear Jorge, is not the end of the world! Zeus who lives right next door, in Mount Olympus, did not cast one of his lethal lightning bolts on him; Ares did not declare war; perhaps even more

realistically, the twenty thousand "injured" Serbians did not jump up from their seats over the fence do kill the Dutch guy! Apparently, the match ended peacefully, clean and transparent! Now it is up to you, my dear, to call on the numerologists and order them to entirely re-discuss it with us! And later, they can fix it, because we cannot bear this mistake. Do what it takes, Jorge; send the new Qualis to Neptune (or Poseidon in case you are in a more Hellenistic mood)! It is necessary to change the criteria, Jorge, as much as it is necessary to navigate!

With all my admiration, friendship and cordiality
Best regards

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