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Literature reviews as a means of communicating progress in research

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Literature reviews serve two basic functions: they provide information to non-specialists on work that has been done and they signal to specialists where the gaps are in knowledge of a particular topic. They are standard academic practice in many disciplines¹ and the conventions surrounding them are widely understood by academics but may not be so obvious to those outside academia. This article provides some comments on literature reviews and offers thoughts on the role they play in the development of academic disciplines for both early career and established researchers and, particularly in the CREATE context, for informing industry and policy makers of a body of work that has been published in a specific field and evaluating that work.

The motive for writing this piece was the critical discussion of large-scale literature reviews at recent CREATE events which prompted questions, particularly from industry audiences: how useful are they and for whom? There has been the sense that literature reviews are somehow lacking, for example, they do not produce ‘answers’ to problems experienced by the industries. There is much to say about this: academic journals do not (or have not) publish(ed) articles on the topic as there is neither academic interest nor expertise or it may just not be in anyone’s career interests - journals can only publish articles that are submitted. Moreover, some topics may not be amenable to academic research because access to data is lacking or there are other information problems. These issues are discussed in this paper.

1. Why have literature reviews?

The quick answer to the question is that in many areas of study the literatures in journal articles, books, theses, working papers and other research publications have become so large that it is difficult for people to keep up even in their own area of work. Literature reviews include theories and commentaries in mathematical as well as verbal form and empirical studies. Each discipline has its own conventions as to the various modes of expression and the balance between theory, empirical results and practice. In broad disciplines academic journals specialise in one type of topic and with multitudes of journals publishing thousands of articles it is just too difficult and time-consuming for most academics to keep abreast of them all, even if they were competent to comprehend everything that is published, which is doubtful. Accordingly, literature reviews provide teachers and researchers with a means of keeping pace with developments. In addition to academics, consultants working on a range of topics in various industries use existing literature reviews for their reports and other professionals, such as civil servants, also do so. It is clearly more efficient for an expert to review the literature and make it accessible to a wider readership than for each one to struggle through it all.

For specialists in a field, though, there is another rationale: knowledge is built up step by step on the back of previous research - ‘standing on the shoulders of giants’ to quote that overused phrase. There are two aspects to this: to be published in a reputable academic journal (something that is now vital for a career in the academic world) a paper has to offer some novelty, either a new theory or version of one, or new analysis of data and so on and a review of the existing literature is a means of establishing that case; secondly, the same criteria, though somewhat reduced in ‘strength’, apply to a

¹ For example, the non-profit *Annual Reviews* publishes reviews in 50 branches of physical and social science. [The mission of Annual Reviews is to provide systematic, periodic examinations of scholarly advances in a number of fields of science through critical authoritative reviews. The comprehensive critical review not only summarizes a topic but also roots out errors of fact or concept and provokes discussion that will lead to new research activity. The critical review is an essential part of the scientific method.](http://www.annualreviews.org/page/about/our-mission-and-our-founder) Quoted from <http://www.annualreviews.org/page/about/our-mission-and-our-founder> accessed 03-06-14.

PhD thesis and the intending PhD student will read literature surveys to see what is ‘out there’ and to choose a topic accordingly. Thus a literature review is commonly the prequel to any such publication as a means of showing a) that the author knows her stuff and b) where she is making a palpable contribution to existing knowledge.

Literature reviews are also commissioned from experts for various reasons by specialist journals, encyclopaedias, learned societies, government departments and other organisations wanting to keep up with developments in a field and communicating them to colleagues. For academic publications, there may be set word counts (the standard journal article is around 7,000 words), which may limit the scope of the review making it less comprehensive or anyway less readable.

2. Where to stop?

However the reviewer goes about the task, choices have to be made to limit the scope of the review since at one level, everything relates to something else. Within interdisciplinary research endeavours, such as CREATE, academics from multiple disciplines are operating in their own spheres while at the same time dealing with common themes and topics. It is not always easy for experts in one discipline to ‘tune-in’ on those from other disciplines and certainly it would be almost impossible to read publications in all of them. So where to stop with a literature review? Even as relatively specialised a topic as ‘copyright’ is studied by lawyers, a range of social scientists, computer scientists, media and cultural theorists. For some purposes it might be useful to include publications from all these disciplines but that could also make the review unwieldy. A review should be comprehensive without being over-burdened and it should be readable. A more concentrated choice of subject matter is therefore likely to work better in those terms. That, however, may mean making an artificial cut off point. For instance, our review (Towse, Handke and Stepan, 2008) of the literature in the economics of copyright did not include work in law and economics (for which, however, there had been a recent review). That choice was made on two grounds: one, that the review would simply be too long and two, that law and economics has a somewhat different ‘take’ on copyright from that of economics, the former being largely concerned with the economic rationale of legal doctrines, such as the copyright term or with exceptions and limitations, while economics deals with the incentive effect copyright law has on markets and its impact on competition, for instance. Those criteria may be disputed and empirical work on the economic effect by legal experts would be thereby omitted. The choice is made clear in the review but readers may disagree or be disappointed.

Another choice that limits the scope of a review is the period over which the literature has been produced. For some purposes it might be desirable to go back to the established classics to provide a context or there might be a natural starting point such as the end date of a previous review. With book and journal publishers digitizing their back catalogue access to earlier literature is now considerably easier but that also increases the sheer volume of potential material to review.

3. Classification headings and search terms

One guide to the choice of the breadth of literature to include could be standardised professional classification systems. Publications with a specific classification could be adopted as a means of selecting the literature to be reviewed. It is not fool proof, however: for example, the *Journal of Economic Literature* which provides the standard classifications in economics, has nothing for

intellectual property under 'K Law and Economics' (while cultural economics has a general Z11 classification). These classifications do not always keep up with research interests and also suffer from a time lag. Moreover, authors are asked to make their own selection of classifications as they deem appropriate but that is subjective to some extent (and could even be strategically chosen).

An alternative would be to use Internet or database search terms to identify the relevant items to be reviewed; that has obviously become standard practice, though one that can be performed more or less systematically. The CREATE working paper 2014/05 on Unlawful File Sharing utilised the scoping method to investigate and summarize the extent and nature of research; that is an example of a highly systematic and relatively objective way of selecting a literature to be reviewed (Watson et al., 2014). The initial search yielded 54,441 publications from 2003-13 that were then 'narrowed down to 206 articles which examined human behavior, intentions or attitudes' (p 2). Despite the greater objectivity achieved by the scoping method, a selection had to be made by the reviewers who then read those articles.

4. Organizing the material

No review is either 'neutral' or value-free since the author must make choices. Another choice by the author is how to organise the selected material. For a start, there would usually be an introduction but its detail or length would depend on the context. For example, for a specialist journal a review would assume familiarity with the field and the meaning of terms used in it but for the general reader, more would have to be explained. So a review of the economics of copyright might explain the basics of the law for an economics readership or alternatively, some economic theory for lawyers. As with any professional writing, the author must have in mind a level of knowledge and interest on the part of the reader and the audience.

After that, the organisation of the literature being reviewed depends both on any established conventions in the subject and the author's style of communicating. Usually there would be section headings possibly with subsections and the skill and expertise of the author in organising the material are typically the main contribution to a review. The headings need to reflect the subject matter of the topic under review and individual publications being reviewed have to be grouped together. Doing so implies not only knowledge of each but also having a broader over-arching conceptualisation, possibly including the relevance to a wider set of questions or even to the discipline as a whole. To be readable, a review needs to be coherently written with a balance between sufficient explanation of each item to do it justice and to put it into context without going into so much detail that the reader might as well read the original in preference to the review. Each item in the review needs referencing and in this respect, a literature review may be said to fall between an annotated bibliography and a book review. Even using the Chicago Manual of Style system - (Smith, 1776) – many bibliographic references in the text can be tedious to read. It is preferable to use the authors' names in the text leaving the reference details to the end of the sentence: so, Adam Smith argued... (Smith, 1776). Of course, there has to be a correctly laid out bibliography at the end. It can take almost as long to produce a correctly referenced bibliography as to write the review!

Equally, overly long quotations are not helpful, the more so as they make for an overly long review. Only when the quotation trumps anything the reviewer could write or is a 'classic' is a long quote satisfactory for example, see footnote 1 of this paper!). It is after all the task of the reviewer to provide a guide to the literature.

The written word is not the only way of communicating results, however: they may also be presented visually as in the case of the scoping method utilised by Daniel Zizzo and his team (Watson et al, 2014). By plotting the frequency of citations using spheres of various sizes and colours to represent them in a three-dimensional diagram with the industry sectors, medium of delivery and motives for unlawful file sharing (UFS) as axes, the authors were able to concisely summarize a huge literature in an economical presentation that furthermore extended understanding of the literature by analysing the human behavioural aspects. In so doing the review added to existing understanding UFS and considered how evidence can be used to predict future UFS. Thus the methodology of the literature review was extended.²

In the same vein, a meta analysis of data can also be utilised to survey and consolidate figures published on a topic by adopting simulation methods. A recent example relating to copyright is the research done by Favale et al., (2013) reviewing schemes in seven countries on rights clearance for orphan works. Using the licence terms and fees for specific commercial and non-commercial uses in those countries' schemes, they formed a dataset of their main characteristics that was then analysed to produce a simulated outcome. They thereby added value to extant work through these methods, which are increasingly being used in the social sciences and management studies.

5. How much evaluation?

Bland writing without a point of view is boring to read and a literature review can be thought of as an 'art form' in its own right. PhD students are often understandably hesitant to pronounce on the work of an established researcher with the result that their literature reviews are often little more than bibliographies. On the other hand, a very opinionated review does not serve the purpose either: too much of the author's opinion is a distraction from the ideas under review. The writer's skill is therefore to find a happy medium. As it is inevitable that the author of a literature review must express or anyway imply having a point of view, as argued earlier in terms of the choices to be made, it is reasonable that he or she offers an evaluation of the literature.

The minimal evaluation would be to leave out pieces that the author of the review does not consider good enough – but omission might also happen due to ignorance and so the message is not unambiguous. Moreover, fairness is expected of a literature review which requires being transparent. That in turn necessitates stating some criteria for evaluating the work of others. One criterion is the contribution to progress or at least to a perception of it. Methodological analyses offer several criteria (methodology being the philosophy of scientific development), namely theoretical and analytical progress and empirical progress. To some extent what is appropriate depends on the context and the aims of the study, though both may work in tandem and the reviewer can make her own choice of criteria and state what they are. A review might begin with the theoretical developments and then move on to discuss empirical findings and then evaluate progress over a given period of time. For instance, that was the approach taken in the methodological review by Blaug of the literature in cultural economics (Blaug, 2001).³

² The authors also argue that their method avoids the acknowledged pitfalls and biases in the standard literature review as described here (see Watson et al., 2014; 7-8.)

³ That survey was commissioned by the Japanese Association for Cultural Economics and followed on from Blaug's previous evaluations of the economics of education and health.

A standard ploy in reviews is to select several publications that are regarded in some sense as more important for more detailed discussion and then bundle together several other references that relate to the main point being made so as to fulfil the obligation to be as comprehensive as possible. The worst case scenario is the misrepresentation of someone's work; however, it may also be desirable to expose 'poor' practice in some contexts.

An evaluation also requires a conclusion and it is common for a survey to summarise the main trends and developments, suggesting gaps in the literature and how research might progress. A critical assessment might well be more use than a neutral summing-up but as above, the author should make the criteria adopted obvious to the reader.

6. What use is a literature survey?

So far what has been said is that the author of a review has a number of choices to make as to the scope of the literature under discussion and the view taken of it by the reviewer. Accordingly, it is probably worthwhile to know something about his or her own credentials and stance on the subject in order to get the most out of reading the review. Ideally, that should be stated by the author but there are different circumstances under which reviews get written and motives for writing them. Two distinct ones come to mind: a review commissioned by a professional journal or society from an established expert in the field to evaluate progress and inform people in the profession; and the literature review that is the conventional starting point for an article, report or PhD thesis. These are likely to be written in different ways, the former to inform and the latter to make the case for the thesis that follows. As with any piece of writing, who is the readership is the most important point to bear in mind but in some contexts that might not be obvious and the level of interest and prior knowledge of readers may be mixed. Many people read a review just to find out what is going on in a particular field. They may not wish or do not need to delve into the possible controversies in a subject. The point is that there are many types of reader and it is likely that all cannot be satisfied with a review: for some it could be too technical or for others too elementary. Therefore the reader should try to obtain prior information about what to look for and the author should carefully consider the level of prior knowledge of the potential readership.

Readers of this paper likely have mixed reasons for finding out about research that is relevant to policy: 'interested' parties are (hopefully) people from the creative and information sectors, policy makers, researchers from other or related fields and people at the early stage of a career. Literature reviews are one way of communicating what work has been done. As stated at the outset, they have both the function of informing about a subject and pointing the way for further research. But writing for a varied audience with different expectations can be difficult. Researchers might be delighted to discover that there is more work to be done on a topic while those in an industry might be frustrated by a sense of lack of progress, lack of 'proof' and mixed results that are an inevitable part of research in social science as revealed in a literature review. It might also seem to some that a literature review is a 'cop-out' – a form of academic procrastination that just ends up with the call for more evidence and hence more research funding.

These points present a challenge for CREATE with its internal multi-disciplinary academic constituents and mission to communicate to the outside world, in particular to people from a variety of

industries and policy interests who are experts in their own area. Literature reviews are important for both these audiences but are a problematic for the author. Perhaps the best stance that reviewers can adopt is to write as straightforwardly as possible.

7. What a literature review does not do

Assuming that the review is written to an acceptable professional standard, that is, it is comprehensive, balanced, fair, well-organised and perceptive as to future directions, there are limits to its usefulness for those outside academia. Primarily, it will not inform about literature that has not been written or, in most cases, published. The review might speculate as to why a certain path has not been taken or topic researched but the author cannot be held culpable for omitting that which does not exist. In the same vein, the author has a duty to accurately report what is in the literature. If something is not congenial to the reader that cannot be helped: don't shoot the messenger! A review cannot do more than the extant literature apart from organising and interpreting it. In the case of the report mentioned above on unlawful file sharing (UFS), the lack of consensus among the large number of studies analysed in the report may be explicable in terms of differing data sources, or conditions when the research was done, such as the then state of technology, but the fact that there were no unambiguous results remains.

There are several reasons why there are gaps in the literature. Academics do not necessarily find it easy to get articles published on some topics and that could limit research on subjects of interest to industry and policy makers. Publication in academic journals is necessary for most promotions in universities but the 'top' academic journals do not accept articles on every subject. Nor do journals accept articles that repeat work that has been done already since they judge an article according to its novelty. Very few articles on the economics of copyright, for instance, appear in the top economics journals; the *Review of Economic Research on Copyright Issues* is the specialist publication for that subject but it does not match them in terms of journal ratings that are regarded as so significant in academia.

It may seem disappointing to industry and policy makers that results they would like to see, such as 'proof' of their own interpretation of events, do not appear in the literature. Sometimes, it has to be accepted that the results identified through the literature review process are either ambiguous or do not support widely held beliefs. One of the tasks of publicly funded research on urgent and contentious topics is to encourage high quality work and publications on topics that *are* of interest to this wider community.

Another reason why some topics are not researched by academics is that appropriate data are not available or accessible. In particular, when the research involves data relating to private enterprises there can be issues of confidentiality and verification that make objective, peer-reviewable studies difficult. Many journals insist that the data they have used are made public or even published along with the article. Some of the early evidence on UFS that was produced by industry bodies was not objective as it was intended as lobby material, labelled 'lobbynamics' by Hargreaves (2012). In response, the Intellectual Property Office (IPO) issued guidelines for submissions to its calls for evidence which quite closely followed those normally required in academic research and publication

(and those are generally made public).⁴ However, it is clear from reading the evidence submitted to IPO that those responsible do not always understand that data and evidence are different. Facts do not speak for themselves, they require interpretation and that in turn requires a hypothesis however loosely expressed. But when the data do not support the hypothesis, it has to be acknowledged as unproven.

The overwhelming problem for much research in social science is that evidence rarely proves a point decisively even when data are available. Recent examples include disputes over the growth of inequality in the distribution of income and wealth in the UK and the prediction of the cost of Scottish independence to the Scots. Sorting through the statistical analysis can clarify how the authors reached their conclusions and can help to resolve disputed results but it often turns out that the differences lie in the underlying assumptions that have to be made.⁵ It is this type of problem that literature reviews are intended to expose. A source of considerable frustration to academics is the predilection for industry and policy makers to latch on to ‘a number’ despite all the caveats and qualifications that are made in the report that produces it. An equally frustrating response is confusion between ‘is’ and ‘ought’: to say that there is no agreement in the literature on file-sharing about the effect it has had on sales is not to condone illegal activity nor to say it does not matter.

8. Final remarks

Given the hazards and potential for misunderstandings of literature reviews, why do we go on with them? Are they suitable vehicles for CREATE to communicate its research efforts? Again the answers would seem to vary according to the intended audience. The ‘traditional’ written literature review suits an academic readership accustomed to spending a good part of their own work reading the work of others. Within CREATE there is certainly a need for internal communication that builds capacity of researchers from various disciplines with differing research and methodological traditions for whom meta analysis of data and scoping reviews as well as the written form of literature review can be useful. Such reviews are also useful for policy makers who need to understand the nuances of research and how conclusions were arrived at. For industry readers, however, time constraints and excessive detail may not be welcome. This poses a dilemma: should we offer short reviews that omit complexities but risk the focus on ‘an answer’ or ‘a number’? My view is that this is a communication skill that we probably need to develop in CREATE: what is needed is clear presentation of the main points of the literature combined with explanation as to why some problems remain unsolved or unresearched. If, for instance, the reason is a lack of access to suitable data, it might be suggested how industry sources with the appropriate data could collaborate in future research. I believe that academics want to communicate their findings to industry and policy makers but most of us have not found the best way of doing so. There is undoubtedly a gap: practical people want answers and academics want unsolved problems! CREATE was set up to overcome this and it is still work in progress.

References

⁴ See IPO (2011/13).

⁵ This topic is discussed in more detail in connection with the estimated benefits of the Digital Copyright Exchange in Towse (2013).

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