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Tibor Braun
—gatekeeper of scientometrics—
an appraisal from a distance

Andrea Scharnhorst

The journal Scientometrics is an institution and indispensable for the field of quantitative studies of science, and its name is closely linked with its founder, Tibor Braun. Actually, I have to admit that I don’t recall meeting Tibor in person at any such possible encounter, which we could have had many years ago, I probably would not have even dared approach him. But even so, he figures as one of the most prominent scientists that I met through my past and current scientific journey. I hope and wish, Tibor, that you will still be able to read much longer into the future, and I would like to take the opportunity of this Festschrift to describe your “invisible” yet important influence in more detail.

The journal Scientometrics belonged to my most favored sources for literature search when I first started to read bibliometrics papers in the context of my PhD. Quantitative studies of science were a new field for me as an active physicist. I remember going to the Academy Library in Berlin, located in a side building of the Staatsbibliothek at the Boulevard Unter den Linden. There, I was reading and excerpting through volumes of the Journal of Documentation, the Journal of the American Society for Information Science—and of course, Scientometrics. Later, when I started to collaborate with ManfredBornitz, I was also impenetrably closed to see all the volumes of this journal, for which Manfred acted many years as an editorial advisor in his living and working room. Imagine how they were at his personal disposal at all times! No wonder then, that when I became employed as a young scientist at the Institute for Theory History and Organization of the Sciences, a research institute of the Academy of the Sciences of the GDR, I was deeply impressed to find myself in a research group with Hiddon Retschitzek. The fact that she already had several publications in Scientometrics made her in my eyes a star and ultimate expert in the field of scientometrics. To get a publication accepted in the journal was like a Hollywood (length) feud. For my first Scientometrics publication in 1990 Jan Vlachy, who for many years was also a member of the editorial board, acted as a kind of mediator. More diagrams, more graphs was his advice, “Everybody from an outside physics audience will understand what science can be explained with the mathematical model if you only present the equations, András!” These were more or less his words and followed my first lesson about the need to explain, visualise and “translate”—clearly patiently and modestly—whatever traveling between different fields. Eventually, the paper got accepted. However, some time after that, Eugene Garfield, with his sharp mind and mountain high experience of editing, asked me over dinner if I should not have been titled “Evolutionary model”—that almost made me blush—(I) the curse of the non-native speaker. But this anecdote also sheds light on the fact that Scientometrics never was just a “technical” journal. It is, as much as other journals in the field, a journal at the interface between many fields: mathematics, physics, social sciences and even humanities (philosophy and history). As such, it is not only an addendum, it becomes the core of scholarship. Also the journal always was and is a field of experimentation. While remaining representative for the changing waves in the mainstream, there was place and space for new innovative, as well as possibly sometimes odd, side streams—if only their disposal at all times! No wonder then, that we had several publications in Scientometrics, our history and the journal were deeply intertwined. Following the idea of the “invisible college of journal gatekeepers”—who else deserves the tribute for that if not its founder and editor-in-chief Tibor Braun! But Tibor Braun has done more for scientometrics than “just” successfully editing one of its major journals—as if that would not have been enough. Tibor Braun—this also the Budapest Group as we used to call the triumvirate of András, Wolfgang and Tibor. The Information Science and Scientometrics Research Unit at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest was (is) an institution as a research group as much as “their” journal. On this plane there is something to be said about academics. Having worked at academies myself across time and countries, I can honestly say that at different places in the world, academics—and here I mean an academy as a host of research institutes and not the society of scholars—are seen and esteemed differently. Some nations are proud of their academics and see them as the crown of their research; others close them by a simple administrative act and yet again others seem not to know exactly what to do with them. In the midst of ongoing debates on what to do with an institution as old as an Academy—a debate which sometimes coincides with the debate on what to do with a library an equally old institution—academies sometimes offer a niche for unusual enterprises. The Budapest Group produces research in many areas in scientometrics and informetrics. They published early on sophisticated mathematical models about dynamic processes in science (flows of citation, publication dynamics) and their Relative Citation Charts (see Figure) belong to the first “landscape maps” of science. They thought about empires around Mentons. Matthew effect. There is no fundamental question in scientometrics that this group has not reflected on. I continue to read their work with great inspiration for my own research. And even from a distance I can honestly say that they would not have been possible without a genius like such as Tibor Braun.

Through the journal Scientometrics, this group also collected unusual ways to make visible data (though pre-processed) available for a large audience. One could almost say that by publishing The Bible, as Manfred calls this special volume of Scientometrics, they were pionners of the spirit of open access and re-usability of data prior to the emergence of the web in academic research. Digital data from bibliographic databases were probably even more restricted than they are nowadays, this brave step allowed other who were without such privileged access to test ideas, to apply indicators and certainly triggered a lot of studies. Tibor Braun’s activities are not restricted to the field of scientometrics, but is it for them to stand light on this. But just by looking from the scientometrics angle, his journey shows the importance and the impact of continuity and endless effort. The variety and maturity of topics he has worked on are impressive and remain an important source of reference for any new generation of scientometricians. It that comes to mind a quotation from Goethe’s Faust: “Wir werden sterben ach bestellen, Dos kennen sie mit Freuden.” (Goethe, Faust, Second part) (eng translation) Who then always to the utmost–for them there is salvation!)

What else is there for me to say other than a deeply felt thank you. Thank you for the intellectual repayments, for providing such an excellent platform of communication, for shaping a lively community, for making it possible for me to be part of it in so many different ways. Maybe one last wish; I would really like to meet. I hope that you will still deeply enjoy your work, otherwise you would never have been able to keep it on such an intense level for such a long time. And so my wish for you is that this pleasure is salvation.