Publish or Perish

A sentence in the preface of the book Web Cartography – Map Design for Interactive and Mobile Devices written by Dr Ian Muehlenhaus (see my review here) particularly caught my interest. Recognising that textbooks on the design of web maps are few and far between, Dr Muehlenhaus states: “Those that do exist tend to either be extremely technical or edited volumes that are often too academic for non-experts.” This image confirms my own observation, which I expressed in the preface to my book Geoinformation – Technologies, Applications and the Environment, published by Springer in 2011. I wrote: “It is becoming increasingly seldom that a textbook is written by one or a few authors... Today it is not unusual when 25 authors, or more, are involved... The topics covered are complicated and specialised.” The crux is – why? Why are so many books published as a collection of edited conference papers? Why do so few professors have an interest in structuring existing knowledge in their field of specialisation and presenting it in a form suited to an audience of students and practitioners? I think I know the answer: the disinterest originates in the current system of reward and career at universities. Taking a closer look at this situation, the tasks of a university are threefold: (1) creation of knowledge; (2) conservation and structuring of knowledge; and (3) transfer of knowledge to students, practitioners and society as a whole. A naive observer would think that these tasks have the same weight and are equally rewarded, but nothing could be further from the truth. The task listed as number 1 – the creation of knowledge – has been hurled out into the far zenith (okay, I may be exaggerating slightly but it is certainly true to some extent). Nowadays it is no longer the actual creation of knowledge which matters, but rather its countable derivative: the number of articles published in high-ranked scientific journals or, to use the jargon, the ‘impact factor’. I recently published several articles in this magazine and I am pretty sure that some of them will become course material. But their formal impact factor will be zero – no reward and no credits because they have been published in a professional journal instead of a scientific one. And that’s not all. It is also the ability to attract funding that counts. I know of professors who have never gained a PhD, who have never published a scientific syllable, but who were appointed because of their network and thus their skills in collecting money. I know of professors who were appointed on the understanding that their education obligations would be de facto non-existent. I know of professors who are very good in knowledge transfer but whose careers have stagnated because they never gained a PhD. When will it stop? I see signs all around the world that members of academia are getting sick and tired of the whirligig of science as a paper-production industry. I see how they are suffering as the reward-and-career system is all but bankrupt. Indeed, they are longing for release from the straitjacket of ‘publish or perish’.

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