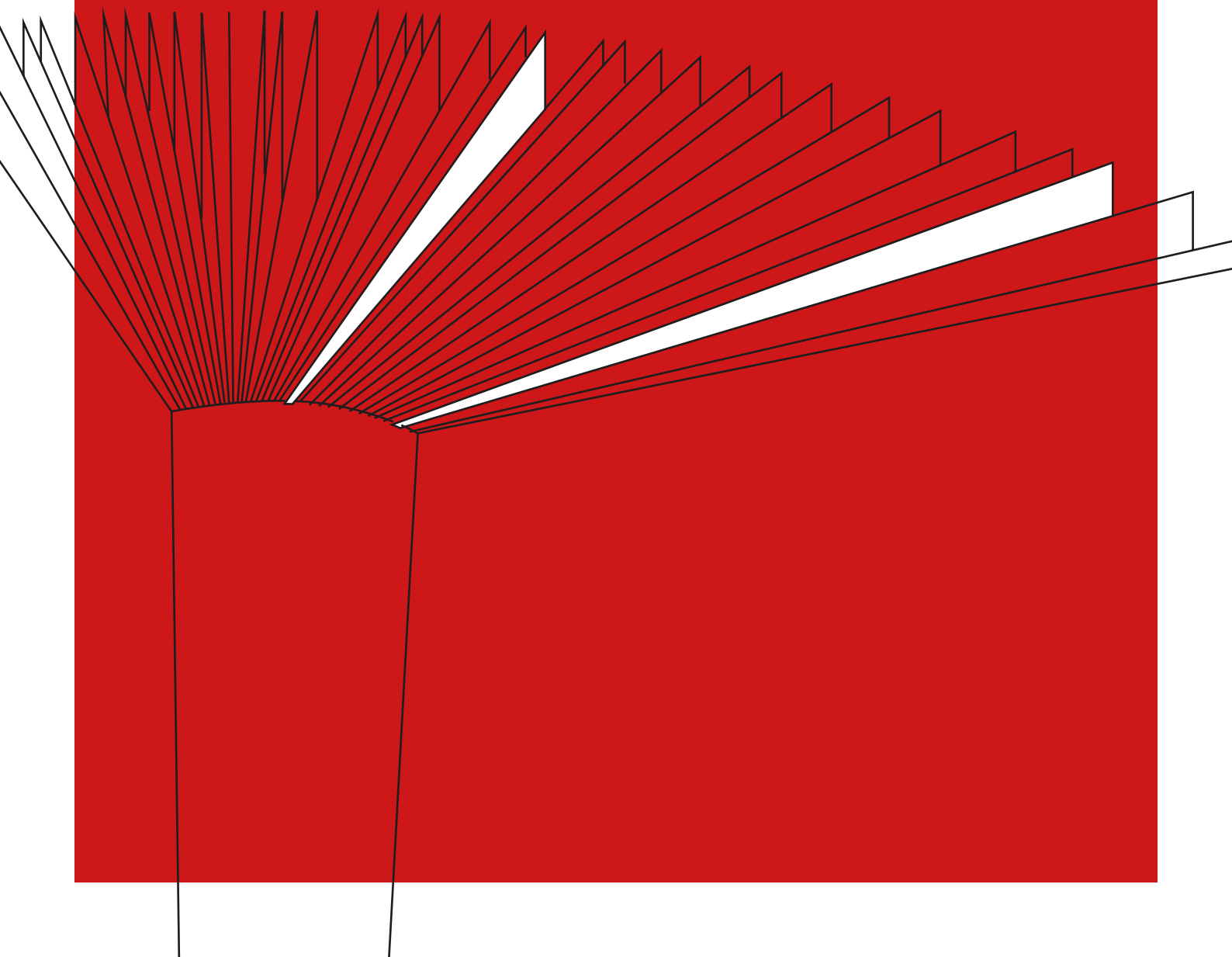
Expertise and Publication Quality in Sociology

A Guide for Journalists



Authors

HENDRIK BOLDT Editor at the Science Media Center Germany

DR LAURA MORRIS Formerly Managing Director of the Rhine Ruhr Center for Science Communication Research; Currently Managing Director of the Dean's Office, Faculty of Law, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf

With support from Prof Dr Sina Farzin (Carl-von-Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg), Prof Dr Julian Hamann (Humboldt Universität zu Berlin), Prof Dr David Kaldewey (Universität Bonn), Prof Dr Simone Rödder (Universität Hamburg und Leibniz-Institut zur Analyse des Biodiversitätswandels), Dr Samir Sellami (Berlin Review, formerly at Soziopolis), Volker Stollorz (SMC), Dr Martin Weinel (Cardiff University) and Dr Sebastian E. Wenz (GESIS – Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften).

Additional support was provided by the Rhine Ruhr Center for Science Communication Research and the Science Media Center Germany.

Funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

Introduction

THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES IN THE MEDIA

As commentators on current political and social developments, the social sciences and humanities shape public debate and foster society's capacity for self-reflection. Their concepts – such as human rights and populism – have become integral to everyday language. Nevertheless, these disciplines are rarely covered systematically as fields of academic research in journalism. Their leading specialist journals receive little attention, and journalism lacks clear heuristics for systematically identifying experts or selecting publications for coverage.

The social sciences and humanities do appear regularly in the media, primarily in the politics, business, and culture sections. There, however, they are often evaluated according to standards that differ from those commonly applied in science journalism: experts are expected to perform well in debates, advance original arguments, express themselves eloquently, or already enjoy public visibility. Studies are often covered because they are promoted by well-connected individuals or organisations, and only rarely because journalists themselves judge them to be particularly relevant or of high quality on the basis of their own observation of the publication landscape.

A PLACE IN SCIENCE JOURNALISM?

Meanwhile, science journalism has developed systematic selection procedures and heuristics for the natural and life sciences. These approaches cannot easily be transferred to the humanities and social sciences, where bibliometric indicators such as the h-index or impact factor remain contested, publication landscapes are more fragmented, and disciplines are shaped by competing methodological approaches.

As a result, these fields remain difficult for science journalism to navigate. Yet what criteria can journalists rely on when an expert must be identified at short notice to comment on current debates? How can the quality of a specialist publication be assessed quickly in order to decide whether it merits coverage or closer reading?

CONTENTS OF THE GUIDELINES

To make the humanities and social sciences more accessible, two guides outline criteria intended to support such decisions, using philosophy and sociology as examples. The guides were developed by groups of sociological and philosophical experts in collaboration with the Rhine Ruhr Center for Science Communication Research and the Science Media Center Germany, and were subsequently tested through larger surveys conducted within the respective disciplines (see the "Methods" section below for further details).

This document presents the criteria for sociology. The criteria for philosophy are available in a separate document.

HOW SHOULD THE GUIDE BE READ?

In the guide, the criteria considered most informative and applicable in practice are listed first, while less important criteria appear further down.

The informative value of the criteria is illustrated using stars: one star indicates “low,” two “moderate,” three “high,” and four “very high” informative value. A high informative value means that a criterion is closely associated with expertise. If such a criterion is fulfilled to a high degree, this suggests that a person possesses expertise.

In the survey underlying the ratings, informative value was assessed separately for different groups – qualitative and quantitative sociologists.

If the assessments differed between groups, or if the average rating fell between two rating levels, this is represented by a “half-star”, as shown in the following figure. Three and a half stars, for example, indicate either that quantitative sociologists assigned four stars to a criterion while qualitative sociologists assigned only three, or that the average rating within both groups fell exactly between three and four stars.



The journalistic applicability of the criteria is illustrated using arrows: one arrow indicates “low” applicability, two indicate “moderate,” and three indicate “high.” Applicability refers to how easily journalists can typically access the information relevant to a given criterion.

Whereas the assessment of informative value is based on surveys involving several hundred participants, the assessment of journalistic applicability relies only on smaller focus groups and is therefore subject to considerably greater uncertainty. For this reason, the applicability scale is also less fine-grained, and there are no “half arrows” analogous to “half-stars.”
The following graphic represents moderate applicability.



The ranking of the criteria is based primarily on their informative value, as indicated by the stars. Applicability is used as a secondary criterion and determines the ranking only when two criteria receive the same star rating.

Criteria for Experts

The criteria presented in the following section provide an initial framework for assessing a person's subject-matter expertise. Other aspects of journalistic relevance, such as the ability to speak concisely in public or potential conflicts of interest, are not addressed in this guide. Because a PhD demonstrates, for the first time, the successful completion of independent research and sustained specialisation, it is treated in this guide as the minimum qualification for expertise. A professorship, by contrast, carries no particular informative value beyond the criteria listed below.

KEY CRITERIA

When assessing a person's expertise, the quality of their publications and their reputation within the discipline are the most important factors. Publications are the most direct indicator of academic activity. Unlike reputation within the discipline, they are also publicly accessible and are therefore particularly well suited to justify public trust in expertise.

Reputation, on the other hand, is more difficult to assess systematically. Since informal enquiries among colleagues are not representative, assessments of reputation should be based on as broad a range of perspectives as possible. In most cases, reputation and publication record should align, and it is therefore advisable to consider them together. Where the two conflict, greater weight should be given to publications. If both publications and reputation indicate a high level of expertise, there is usually no need to consult additional criteria.

ADDITIONAL CRITERIA

The remaining criteria presented below can serve as supplementary indicators – for example, to develop a more precise picture of expertise or in situations where the quality of publications and reputation cannot easily be assessed. They should not be used in isolation, but rather in combination with one another.

TAKING SCIENTIFIC DIVERSITY INTO CONSIDERATION

In sociology in particular, it is crucial to take account of the broad spectrum of methodological approaches and political positions within the discipline. Doing so helps reflect the diversity of sociological discourse. Accordingly, notes are included under individual criteria where the assessment of their informative value differs between qualitative and quantitative sociologists. For example, monographs are of somewhat lesser importance in quantitative sociology.

1 Quality of Journal Articles

Informative Value: ★★★★

Applicability: »»



The quality of journal articles should be considered substantially more important than their mere number. The recency of publications also matters, as specialist knowledge in sociology can become outdated after only a few years, depending on the research topic. The criteria in this guide can be used to assess publication quality quickly and approximately.

Journal articles are easier to assess using formal criteria than monographs. A larger number of high-quality academic articles therefore provides a more reliable indication of expertise. While having written a monograph should not be a necessary requirement for expertise, caution is warranted if a publication list contains almost no academic articles.

2 Quality of Monographs

Informative Value: ★★★½

Applicability: »»



The quality of monographs should be considered substantially more important than their mere quantity. The recency of publications also matters, as specialist knowledge can become outdated after only a few years, depending on the research topic. The criteria in this guide can be used to assess monograph quality quickly and approximately.

However, monograph quality is more difficult to assess using formal criteria than journal articles. Compared to journal articles, monographs can serve as an additional indicator of expertise and communication skills, but should not be used as the primary indicator. In the survey on which this guide is based, the informative value of the quality of monographs was considered to be substantially higher by qualitative researchers than in quantitative sociology (Cohen's d=0.52). While having written a monograph should not be a necessary requirement for expertise, caution is warranted if a publication list contains almost no academic articles.

3 Reputation Among Peers

Informative Value: ★★★☆

Applicability: ❯❯❯



A researcher's reputation can be assessed through consultations with several peers who possess relevant expertise, supplemented by indirect indicators such as academic awards or editorial roles. To avoid one-sided representations of a research field and to reflect a broad range of expertise, it is important to include a diversity of methodological and political perspectives. If a snowball sampling approach based on recommendations is used, it should therefore begin from as diverse a set of disciplinary perspectives as possible. This does not apply when the aim is to have a specific piece of research assessed by experts. In such cases, the relevant experts should be those familiar with the particular methodological perspective in question.

4 Number of Publications on the Topic

Informative Value: ★★½☆

Applicability: ❯❯❯



A large number of publications indicates sustained engagement with a scientific question over many years. It can therefore serve as a supplementary criterion for assessing a person's expertise.

However, the number of publications should not be regarded as a strong indicator regardless of quality: publishing extensively is easier than publishing high-quality research. Publication count is therefore most meaningful when a minimum standard of quality is met. In addition, writing a monograph is more labour-intensive, which is why monographs should be given greater weight in the count. Conversely, co-authoring an academic article generally requires less effort; being the lead author of an article should by contrast be weighted more heavily.

In the survey underlying this guide, quantitative sociologists regarded the number of publications as a slightly more informative indicator of expertise than qualitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.32).

5 Reviews for Prestigious Journals



Informative Value: ★★½☆

Applicability: »»

Serving as a reviewer for prestigious journals suggests that the journal's editors attribute a corresponding level of expertise to that individual. By contrast, this indicator is less informative in the case of less prestigious journals, which often struggle to recruit reviewers and are therefore less selective in assigning review tasks. At the same time, established researchers are often less likely to have the time to produce detailed peer reviews. A lower level of reviewing activity should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of limited expertise.

This criterion is applicable in many cases, as reviewing activities are often listed transparently in academic CVs.

6 Third-Party Funding



Informative Value: ★★½☆

Applicability: »»

While substantial third-party funding from renowned funding bodies can indicate expertise, the absence of significant third-party funding does not necessarily imply a lack of expertise. Grants from the German Research Foundation (DFG), the European Research Council (ERC), and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation are particularly highly regarded. Third-party funding awarded by ministries or foundations is comparatively less indicative.

External funding is only a limited indicator of expertise, since its allocation also depends on skills in project acquisition and coordination and is, moreover, highly dependent on the research topic. More important is what the funding produces: researchers who regularly secure third-party funding should ideally be able to demonstrate corresponding academic publications that document research progress.

In the survey underlying this guide, quantitative sociologists regarded third-party funding as a slightly more informative indicator of expertise than qualitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.25).

7 h5-Index

Informative Value: ★★½☆

Applicability: ❯❯❯



As a citation-based metric, the h5-index reflects how frequently a person's publications from the past five years have been cited in other academic works. It measures the reception of recent publications within the research community, but is susceptible to bias. Review articles, for example, are frequently cited but rarely constitute genuinely new research contributions.

It is difficult to provide specific benchmarks for what constitutes a high h5-index. Citation figures depend heavily on the discipline and research field. For example, a particularly high h5-index may result from an interdisciplinary approach, because such publications are cited more frequently outside sociology as well. Conversely, highly specialised sociologists may be cited less frequently. The h5-index can nevertheless serve as a useful supplementary indicator, as citation data can be retrieved relatively easily from common academic databases such as Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus, as well as through the Publish or Perish software. However, the index may vary depending on the database used and the publications included. Web of Science and Scopus generally include only published academic literature in their calculations, whereas Google Scholar automatically captures a broader range of publications, such as preprints, but is not always reliable.

Most platforms provide only the general h-index, so the h5-index often has to be calculated separately, for example using Publish or Perish. Time-adjusted variants of the h-index, such as the h5-index, are useful for measuring the reception of recent publications. By contrast, the general h-index covers citations to all works published to date. Since this value cannot decrease, even if a person has not published any new research for a long time, it gives insufficient weight to current research activity. It is therefore advisable to supplement the general h-index with an assessment of publication recency and, where possible, to use the h5-index instead.

In the survey underlying this guide, quantitative sociologists regarded the h5-index as a substantially more informative indicator of expertise than qualitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.5).

8 Academic Awards

Informative Value: ★★½☆

Applicability: »



Receiving prestigious awards from academic societies indicates a certain degree of recognition within the academic community. However, in addition to research output, the awarding of prizes may also be influenced by disciplinary politics or the societal relevance of the topic. Moreover, there are only a limited number of awards, meaning that many highly competent researchers do not receive any. The absence of an award should therefore not be taken as evidence against a person's expertise.

9 Positions in Academic Societies

Informative Value: ★★☆☆

Applicability: »



Holding key roles in academic societies is a good indication that a person is generally recognised within the field. Such positions also often go hand in hand with a strong professional network. However, particularly established figures generally avoid the workload associated with these usually voluntary roles. As a result, apart from especially high-profile positions, they are often held by early-career researchers.

In the survey underlying this guide, qualitative sociologists regarded positions in scientific societies as a slightly more informative indicator of expertise than quantitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.35).

10 Reputation of the Institution

Informative Value: ★★☆☆

Applicability: »



Affiliation with a prestigious academic institute can provide a favourable research environment, but it offers only limited reliable information about an individual's expertise. Highly qualified researchers, as well as less experienced staff, can be found at both prestigious and less prestigious institutions.

The practical applicability of this criterion is also limited, as identifying which institutes are renowned in a particular field usually requires consultation with relevant researchers.

11 Editorship

Informative Value [1]: ★★½☆☆

Applicability: »»



When editorships of anthologies and handbooks are used as indicators of expertise, the quality and reputation of the publication venue are decisive. Guest editorship of special issues in renowned specialist journals is particularly valuable, as these are usually subject to a highly competitive selection process and require a certain level of expertise and recognition in the relevant field.

By contrast, editing German-language anthologies is often less informative, as quality can vary considerably and selection criteria are often less stringent. Handbooks published by reputable presses, such as the Oxford Handbook series, can also serve as reliable indicators of expertise because of their high publication standards.

12 Teaching

Informative Value [2]: ★☆☆☆

Applicability: »»



In addition to research, teaching experience can also suggest a certain degree of broad expertise. However, teaching without accompanying research generally conveys more basic knowledge and remains relatively superficial, whereas current research provides deeper insights and more specialised knowledge. Research experience is therefore generally more informative than teaching experience when assessing specialised and up-to-date expertise.

[1], [2] While the informative value of the other criteria was assessed directly in the survey underlying this guide, this criterion was evaluated solely by the focus group known as the “Quality Circle Sociology.” Because it appeared to have little informative value, it was not included in the larger survey.

13 Media Presence

Informative Value: ★☆☆☆

Applicability: »



A person's media presence as an expert is a relatively weak indicator of their actual expertise. At most, it suggests that the person may be capable of speaking publicly on a topic, but this should always be verified against other criteria. Within the discipline, current media practices for selecting experts are viewed very critically.

Quality of Publications

How can the quality of a sociological publication be assessed as simply and quickly as possible? The criteria presented in the following section provide an initial framework for assessing the academic quality of monographs and journal articles. They are intended to make such assessments possible without requiring a detailed reading of the publication or an independent specialist evaluation of its quality. These criteria are not intended to replace substantive engagement with the publication, but to complement it – for example, by helping journalists select which publications merit closer examination. Other criteria of journalistic relevance, such as the newsworthiness or originality of a publication's content, are not addressed here.

Criteria for Journal Articles

KEY CRITERIA

In addition to the authors' expertise, information about the journal in which an article was published is particularly helpful for quickly assessing its quality. The number of citations an article receives can serve as a supplementary indicator, but citation counts are difficult to interpret and usually become meaningful only after several years.

REPUTATION OF THE JOURNAL

The most direct measure of a journal's quality is its reputation among researchers, as surveyed for this guide. It is important to note that the reputation of specialist journals can vary considerably between quantitative and qualitative sociologists. Here, one must decide from which disciplinary perspective quality is to be assessed. The survey results on journal reputation can be combined with other indicators, such as acceptance rate, peer review, and impact factor. As a minimum standard of acceptable quality, a journal should generally have a peer review process.

COMBINING THE CRITERIA

Overall, only a combination of several criteria provides a reliable basis for the rapid assessment of journal and article quality. However, such criteria do not guarantee that a given journal article is of high quality. Weaker articles can appear even in top journals, while important work is also published by less renowned authors and in less renowned journals.

CLOSER READING REMAINS NECESSARY

Ideally, these criteria should therefore serve as an initial selection tool for journalistic reporting and be supplemented by a closer reading of the article, as well as by assessments of its academic significance and quality by experts.

1 Authors' Expertise

Informative Value: ★★★½

Applicability: ❯❯❯



Since a person's expertise, as discussed above, is closely linked to their previous publication record, a high level of expertise tends to suggest a corresponding level of quality in future publications.

However, this criterion is somewhat difficult to apply, as the authors' expertise must first be assessed – for example, using the criteria for individuals described above. This often requires the quality of the person's other publications to be evaluated on the basis of additional criteria. Furthermore, this criterion may be more difficult to apply when publications have multiple co-authors, as co-authorship is increasingly common in social science research. In such cases, the role of the lead author is particularly relevant.

In the survey underlying this guide, qualitative sociologists regarded this criterion as a slightly more informative indicator of expertise than quantitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.32).

2 Reputation of the Journal

Informative Value: ★★★☆

Applicability: ❯❯❯



A journal's reputation is an important indicator of the quality of the articles it publishes.

Despite the large number of journals, this criterion is relatively easy to apply on the basis of surveys of journal quality conducted for this guide. Peer assessments of journal quality provide a reliable indication of a journal's quality. Ultimately, the discipline itself defines what is considered high-quality research, and sociologists gain direct insight into journal quality through sustained engagement with the literature.

It is important to bear in mind that there may be good reasons to publish high-quality articles in less prestigious journals – for example, because the research is more relevant to a national context, or because a particular academic discourse is still emerging and currently takes place only in smaller, specialised journals.

3 Quality of Peer Review

Informative Value: ★★★☆

Applicability: »



Peer review is considered a key minimum requirement for acceptable journal quality. If a journal does not conduct peer review, its quality should be viewed with considerable scepticism, unless there are compelling reasons to assume otherwise – in particular, a strong reputation within the discipline.

A rigorous review process increases the likelihood that a journal's articles will be of high quality. However, the quality of the review process cannot be determined solely from formal criteria, such as whether peer review is double- or triple-blind; instead, it is often a matter of insider knowledge. It may also vary between individual reviewers for the same journal.

Some journals claim to conduct peer review, although in practice manuscripts are assessed solely by the editor ("editorial review"); such procedures provide only minimal quality assurance. Some predatory journals also claim to conduct peer review but make decisions so quickly that serious quality checks are impossible. The term "peer review" is not protected, so there is no guarantee that a purported peer review process is actually robust.

The formal nature of the peer review process is usually documented on journal websites and is therefore easy to verify.
In the survey underlying this guide, quantitative sociologists regarded this criterion as a slightly more informative indicator of quality than qualitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.29).

4 Journal Impact Factor

Informative Value: ★★½☆

Applicability: »»



The impact factor measures how often a journal's articles are cited and can therefore provide a rough indication of its relevance within the field, and often of its quality as well. However, its informative value is highly context-dependent. Citation practices vary by discipline; interdisciplinary or highly specialised journals address communities of different sizes and are therefore cited with varying frequency; and German-language journals often have lower impact factors because they serve smaller academic communities, even when they are of high quality.

In qualitative sociology, the impact factor also plays a less prominent role. In the survey conducted for this guide, it did not correlate with qualitative sociologists' own assessments of journal quality. Quantitative sociologists, by contrast, regarded it as substantially more informative, and it did correlate with their assessments of the journals.

Overall, impact factor rankings are primarily useful for identifying a small number of leading journals in general sociology, rather than for making fine-grained distinctions among the many other journals. As a rough guide for specialist sociology journals, good international journals often have an impact factor of 3–5, while top journals tend to be above 5. This can be checked relatively easily via the freely accessible Scimago website, which provides discipline-specific rankings.

Predatory journals, which merely simulate academic quality, sometimes manipulate their impact factor in order to appear more reputable. Warning signs include a very new journal with a rapidly rising impact factor, an extremely high number of publications, and unusually fast review processes. To be on the safe side, particular attention should be paid to the journal's reputation within the field rather than relying solely on this single metric.

In the survey underlying this guide, quantitative sociologists regarded this criterion as a slightly more informative indicator of quality than qualitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.37).

5 Number of Citations

Informative Value: ★★½☆

Applicability: ❯❯❯



From around three years after the publication of a journal article, citation counts can indicate how relevant the article is considered within the field. A high number of citations often suggests high article quality, although some articles may be cited primarily for purposes of criticism.

Although citation counts are usually easy to find in the online metrics provided for an article, it is not possible to define a universally applicable threshold for what constitutes a high number of citations. Citation practices vary depending on the size of the academic community and the subject area. Citation counts should therefore always be assessed in comparison with similar publications over a similar period of time, which makes this criterion more difficult to apply.

In the survey underlying this guide, quantitative sociologists regarded this criterion as a significantly more informative indicator of quality than qualitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.5).

6 Listing in Citation Databases

Informative Value: ★★½☆

Applicability: ❯❯❯



Inclusion in an established citation database, such as Web of Science or Scopus (the latter freely accessible and verifiable via Scimago), can serve as an indicator that a journal meets a minimum level of academic relevance. It is therefore also an indication of a certain quality of the publications appearing therein.

However, a very large number of journals are listed in these databases and their quality varies considerably. Furthermore, the databases are operated by private companies and it is not transparent why some journals are included and others are not. In particular, German-language journals are under-represented, even though they may be of a quality comparable to some of the listed international journals.

In the survey conducted for this guide, the criterion was rated as slightly more meaningful by sociologists conducting quantitative research than by those conducting qualitative research (Cohen's d=0.27).

7 International Reach

Informative Value: ★★½☆

Applicability: ❯❯❯



International English-language journals are often regarded as indicators of quality because they reach a wider specialist audience, and many researchers therefore seek to publish there first. At the same time, depending on the topic, it may also be appropriate to publish high-quality work in national journals. International reach should therefore be assessed only in relation to the relevant disciplinary and research context. Relevant, high-quality research on national debates may also appear in smaller national journals. In sociology, English-language European journals in particular are often important venues for high-quality studies using German data.

In the survey underlying this guide, quantitative sociologists regarded this criterion as a slightly more informative indicator of quality than qualitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.28).

8 Expertise of the Editors

Informative Value: ★★½☆

Applicability: ❯❯❯



In addition to indicating quality, the editorial team can also provide insight into the type of sociology a journal publishes. However, assessing this criterion thoroughly is difficult, since verifying the editors' expertise is time-consuming and other factors, such as their commitment to quality and level of editorial engagement, also play an important role.

As a formal indicator, a rotating editorial board with broad disciplinary representation tends to suggest quality and balance in general sociology journals. In specialised journals, however, a single highly renowned editor can also help ensure quality. At the same time, formal details alone are unreliable: predatory or commercially driven open-access journals may list very large editorial boards without this providing any meaningful indication of quality.

In the survey underlying this guide, qualitative sociologists regarded this criterion as a slightly more informative indicator of quality than quantitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.24).

9 Low Acceptance Rate

Informative Value: ★★☆☆

Applicability: »»



The acceptance rate indicates the percentage of submitted articles that a journal publishes. A low acceptance rate, for example in the single digits, suggests a more selective quality-based review process.

Its usefulness as a quality indicator is limited to a small but growing number of cases, since an increasing number of journals now list their acceptance rates among their journal metrics or on their publishers' websites. However, journals sometimes calculate acceptance rates slightly differently, so the figures are not always directly comparable.

A particularly high acceptance rate is characteristic of predatory or commercially driven open-access journals that seek to maximise publication fees and therefore publish as many submitted articles as possible, regardless of academic quality. The acceptance rate can therefore serve as a criterion for distinguishing such journals from reputable academic journals, provided it is known.

In the survey underlying this guide, quantitative sociologists regarded this criterion as a slightly more informative indicator of quality than qualitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.34).

Criteria for Monographs

KEY CRITERIA?

There is no clearly established, readily applicable set of indicators that provides quick and reliable guidance on the quality of monographs. Many potential criteria are either cumbersome to apply or useful only in a limited number of cases, such as awards or multiple reviews by renowned experts.

More widely applicable criteria include the author's expertise and the publisher's reputation. However, a publisher's reputation, and the quality associated with it, are reliable indicators primarily in the case of leading presses. University presses can generally be assumed to publish work of high quality, whereas the quality of publications from other publishers varies more widely. To make this criterion practically useful, survey-based ratings of publishers can be used to provide a rough assessment of quality.

COMBINATION OF CRITERIA NEEDED

Because there are few highly informative criteria and the information needed to apply them is often unavailable, it is advisable to use several criteria in combination. Individual criteria should not be relied upon in isolation. Ideally, these criteria should serve as an initial selection tool for journalistic reporting and be supplemented by a closer reading of the monograph, as well as by assessments of its academic significance and quality by additional subject experts.

1 Authors' Expertise

Informative Value: ★★★☆

Applicability: »



Since a person's expertise, as discussed above, is closely linked to their previous publication record, a high level of expertise tends to suggest that future publications will be of corresponding quality.

However, this criterion is difficult and labour-intensive to apply, as the authors' expertise must first be assessed – for example, on the basis of the criteria for individuals described above. This often requires the quality of the person's other publications to be evaluated using additional criteria.

In the survey underlying this guide, qualitative sociologists regarded this criterion as a slightly more informative indicator of quality than quantitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.21).

2 Quality of the Review Process

Informative Value: ★★★☆

Applicability: »



In the case of monographs, the review process often consists solely of editorial review; peer review is less common. While peer review may indicate quality, it is not a reliable indicator on its own, as the scope and quality of the review process vary considerably. Moreover, the actual quality of peer review and editing is usually a matter of insider knowledge, which makes this criterion difficult to apply. Standardised peer review procedures are more common among international publishers; many German-language publishers lack them. However, the absence of peer review does not automatically imply low quality.

3 Reputation of the Publisher

Informative Value: ★★½☆

Applicability: »»



It is not possible to judge the quality of a monograph solely on the basis of where it is published. Nevertheless, the publisher can serve as an important indicator. Compared with academic journals, the quality of publications issued by individual publishers varies more widely. While renowned English-language university presses such as Oxford or Harvard are often associated with consistently high quality, the situation is more complex for German-language publishers. Broad-based publishers such as Suhrkamp or C.H. Beck publish a wide range of works, meaning that outstanding monographs may appear alongside less carefully crafted ones.

This criterion is easy to apply, as the survey collected data on publisher reputation.

4 Assessment of Reviews

Informative Value: ★★½☆

Applicability: »»



Reviews in academic journals can help assess quality, provided they are evaluated carefully. The mere number of reviews a monograph receives is not a reliable indicator, as well-connected authors may be able to generate reviews regardless of the work's scholarly relevance. Individual reviews should also not be given too much weight. Only multiple reviews from reputable sources that arrive at similar quality assessments constitute a strong indicator of quality.

The following guiding questions are useful when evaluating reviews:

- Who wrote the review? What interests or expertise does the reviewer have? Is the reviewer an early-career researcher, a colleague from the same institution, or an established expert with subject-specific expertise?
- Where was the review published – for example, in a reputable specialist journal?
- How is the review structured? Are the criticisms clear, nuanced, and well founded, or are they sweeping, superficial judgements?

It should be noted that reviews reflect different perspectives. Divergent judgements may point to the multidimensional nature of quality – for example, when a monograph is methodologically sound but theoretically controversial. Such differences often require substantive engagement with the reviews. Using reviews as an indicator of quality therefore requires considerable effort and is particularly suitable for targeted research.

In the survey underlying this guide, qualitative sociologists regarded this criterion as a slightly more informative indicator of quality than quantitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.23).

5 Academic Awards

Informative Value: ★★½☆

Applicability: »



If a monograph receives an academic award, this indicates high quality. The strength of this indicator depends on the type of award: prizes from scientific societies carry greater weight than popular science awards. Early-career and dissertation awards are also meaningful, as they are often awarded within smaller, thematically and methodologically focused communities.

However, since only a very small proportion of publications receive an award at all, the absence of an award is not evidence of poor quality. Moreover, the awarding of prizes may be influenced by paradigms and disciplinary politics. An award therefore indicates what is considered excellent within a particular community, but not necessarily what is undisputed within the discipline as a whole.

In the survey underlying this guide, qualitative sociologists regarded this criterion as a slightly more informative indicator of quality than quantitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.22).

6 Reputation of the Series

Informative Value: ★★½☆

Applicability: »



Monographs are sometimes published as part of a thematically coherent series. A strong academic reputation of the series suggests that the monograph meets a minimum standard of quality. However, a series' reputation is usually known only to insiders. Otherwise, it can be assessed only roughly by considering the authors represented in the series: do renowned researchers publish there?

7 Number of Citations

Informative Value: ★★☆☆

Applicability: »»



The number of citations a monograph receives, for example in Google Scholar, can indicate the extent to which it has been recognised within the field. However, a high citation count alone is not a reliable indicator of quality. Controversial works may be cited frequently because they attract criticism, and interdisciplinary publications may achieve higher citation rates because they are received in related disciplines. In addition, citation data in Google Scholar are not always reliable.

Citation counts also depend on the date of publication, as more recent monographs have fewer citations. They can therefore provide a useful indication only after some time has passed; as a rule of thumb, the monograph should be at least five years old.

The following figures can be used as a rough guide:

- 0–5 citations: low visibility; possible indication of limited relevance
- 10+ citations: the monograph has begun to attract attention; initial indication of reception and impact within the discipline
- 100+ citations: the monograph has broad resonance and is frequently cited within the discipline

In the survey underlying this guide, quantitative sociologists regarded this criterion as a slightly more informative indicator of quality than qualitative sociologists did (Cohen's d = 0.48).

8 Quality of the Cited Literature

Informative Value: [3] ★★☆☆

Applicability: »»



The composition of the bibliography can also provide indications of a monograph's quality. If high-quality sources – particularly English-language journal articles from leading journals – are not included at all, this may suggest that relevant literature has been overlooked, which can indicate lower quality. However, the inclusion of high-quality sources does not guarantee high quality; rather, it represents a minimum requirement for academic work.

[3] While the informative value of the other criteria was assessed directly in the survey underlying this guide, this criterion was evaluated solely by the focus group known as the "Quality Circle Sociology". Because it appeared to have little informative value, it was not included in the larger survey.

9 Low Acceptance Rate of the Publisher



Informative Value: ★★☆☆

Applicability: ❯❯❯

The lower a publisher's acceptance rate, the smaller the proportion of submitted monographs that are actually published. A low acceptance rate may therefore indicate a more selective review process and, consequently, a higher average quality of the monographs published. However, its informative value for assessing individual monographs is limited. In particular, a low acceptance rate may result from factors other than quality-based selection.

Furthermore, unlike acceptance rates for journal articles, acceptance rates for monographs are generally not publicly available.

Methods

ROLE OF THE FOCUS GROUP

This guide brings together the recommendations of the "Quality Circle Sociology", a focus group comprising academic sociologists and representatives of the Rhine Ruhr Center for Science Communication Research (RRC) and the Science Media Center Germany (SMC). It was developed through an iterative process of discussion, at the end of which the Quality Circle jointly agreed on the present version.

The members of the Quality Circle were Prof Dr Sina Farzin (Carl-von-Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg), Prof Dr Julian Hamann (Humboldt Universität zu Berlin), Prof Dr David Kaldewey (Universität Bonn), Prof Dr Simone Rödder (Universität Hamburg und Leibniz-Institut zur Analyse des Biodiversitätswandels), Dr Samir Sellami (Berlin Review, formerly at Soziopolis), Volker Stollorz (SMC), Dr Martin Weinel (Cardiff University) and Dr Sebastian E. Wenz (GESIS – Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften). Hendrik Boldt (SMC) and Dr Laura Morris (RRC) chaired the sessions and drafted the guide on the basis of the group's discussions.

ASSESSMENT OF INFORMATIVE VALUE VIA SURVEY

The assessment of the informative value of individual criteria also incorporated the results of a larger survey of German-speaking sociologists; a more detailed account can be found in a separate publication currently under review. The survey was distributed via sociological scientific societies and sent to a list of all sociology chairs in German-speaking countries. It was fully completed by 262 respondents, 53 per cent of whom had completed a habilitation. Respondents rated the criteria on Likert scales. For the purposes of this guide, these responses were interpreted as numerical values, ranging from 1 = no informative value to 5 = very high informative value, and then averaged. A mean of 3.1, for example, was reported as "moderate" informative value. If the mean fell exactly between two whole numbers, with a maximum deviation of ±0.1, both ratings were stated. Values between 3.4 and 3.6, for instance, were reported as "moderate to high" informative value, symbolically represented by three and a half stars.

HANDLING OF DISCIPLINARY DIVERSITY

In addition, mean scores were calculated separately for quantitative and qualitative sociologists. Where the assessments differed – for example, "moderate" among quantitative sociologists and "high" among qualitative sociologists – this was indicated as "moderate to high" informative value, again represented by three and a half stars. The descriptions of the criteria also indicate the extent to which the mean assessments of quantitative and qualitative sociologists differed from one another. The standardised mean difference was calculated using Cohen's d, rounded to two decimal places. This involves dividing the difference between the group means by the pooled standard deviation of the two groups, thereby interpreting the difference relative to the variation within the groups. The underlying idea is that a difference between means is more meaningful when the variation in the data is lower. If Cohen's d was at least 0.2 but below 0.5, it

was indicated in the description of a criterion that one group regarded the criterion as “slightly” more informative than the other. If Cohen’s d was at least 0.5, the criterion is described as “substantially” more informative for one group compared to the other. The highest value measured was d = 0.52 for the assessment of the informative value of monographs for expertise.

The reason for calculating assessments separately is the assumption that the two subgroups differ, in some cases considerably, in their publication practices and professional cultures. To reflect this diversity, both perspectives were given equal weight and differences were highlighted. This ensures that differences within the discipline remain transparent to journalists. A single overall mean, by contrast, would have depended heavily on which group happened to be numerically dominant in the survey.

ASSESSMENT OF APPLICABILITY

The assessment of the applicability of individual criteria, as well as their further description, is not based on the survey but on the assessments of the Sociology focus group.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the members of the Quality Circle for their voluntary work and support during many hours of joint discussion in the focus groups and beyond. We are also grateful to the survey participants, who provided detailed insights into the discipline's views on expertise, publication quality, and the reputation of publishers and journals.

We also thank the Volkswagen Foundation, whose financial support made this guide and the associated publications possible.

The guide was written by:

Hendrik Boldt
Editor at the Science Media Center Germany

Dr Laura Morris
Formerly Managing Director of the Rhine Ruhr Center for Science Communication Research; Currently Managing Director of the Dean's Office, Faculty of Law, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf



rhine ruhr
center for science communication
research





VolkswagenStiftung