

Interesting vs Impactful

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The Four I's

The Four I's

In my time as a researcher, I've noticed four different things researchers often desire for their work to be

(and they all start with "I")

- 1 interesting
- 2 illustrious
- 3 influential
- 4 impactful

The Four I's: How I Define Them

Interesting—work that is exciting, novel, clever, lucid, and/or beautiful

Illustrious—work that is highly celebrated, distinguished, and admired

Influential—work that seems to change the world, but not necessarily counterfactually and not necessarily for the better

Impactful—work that changes the world counterfactually and for the better

My View: Impact vs The Rest

In my own view, what really matters is impact.

At worst, the other three are a distraction—tempting but ultimately unhelpful

At best, the other three are helpful heuristics or pipelines to achieving impact

Let's go through them one by one

Interesting

Interesting

In my opinion, academia is full of very bright people doing things that very bright people tend to do

Generating knowledge and ideas that are exciting, new, and intellectually *interesting*

Interesting

What makes knowledge intellectually interesting?

It's hard to describe, and is often at least somewhat subjective

But nevertheless, many tend to know it when they see it

In which case, they may describe the work as

- exciting
- novel, clever
- beautiful, aesthetic, elegant
- clean, simple, intuitive
- lucid, cogent

Interesting

I believe many researchers care primarily about doing work that they find interesting

The other three I's may be a bonus, but ultimately what drives them is their curiosity

The discovery of new knowledge that they find exciting, stimulating, and ultimately, interesting

Illustrious

The Four I's
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Illustrious
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Influential
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Impactful
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Closing
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Illustrious

A good friend once told me something I found equally comical and disturbing

“Academics love prestige to the point at which it’s a perversion.”

I think that in many instances, he’s right, and that many (but certainly not all) researchers are driven significantly or primarily by prestige

By respect, admiration, and recognition from others

For their work to be illustrious

Influential

The Four I's
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Influential

This one is the most subtle, and the one that may differ most from standard usage of the word

I define influential as follows

Influential—work that seems to change the world, but not necessarily counterfactually and not necessarily for the better

The idea is that many things *appear* to change the world, but there are two reasons that appearance may come apart from what we might ultimately care about

Reason #1

It's not counterfactual.

- Suppose I advise the president to pass what becomes a hugely beneficial bill
- But had I not been around, the president would have asked someone else who would have given precisely the same advice
- I may get all the recognition and fame for the bill. I may be regarded as highly influential. But I didn't actually improve the world at all—the bill would have been passed either way
- The same can be said for a paper that becomes very influential—maybe had I not written that paper, an even better version of that same paper would have been written instead

Reason #2

It's not beneficial.

- Suppose I do something that changes the course of history—like start Facebook or write a seminal paper that inspires an entire sub-discipline of a field
- These are certainly very *influential* things, in that I've had a large influence on the world
- But they may not be beneficial for the world—in which case merely being influential may not be the thing we ought to seek in the end

Influential: Examples

Here are some examples of things I would regard as **influential**, but not necessarily as having counterfactual or positive impact

- Receiving many citations from other papers or patents
- Policymakers referring to and legislation being justified by the work
- Advising politicians directly
- Inspiring policy changes in governments, firms, or NGOs

Many researchers refer to this type of influence as “real-world impact,” but I will reserve the term “impact” for something stronger, and will use the word “influential” to refer to this

Influential: Examples

Here are some ways in which research that is influential might not be beneficial:

- I write a paper which garners a lot of attention and recognition, but in fact it was just easily marketable and wasn't actually that useful, and in fact it distracted from more useful things—making the world a slightly worse place as a result
- I write a paper that gives rise to a ton of new patents, but in fact the technology stemming from those patents makes people's lives worse

Influential: Examples

- I write a paper that becomes very influential academically and politically, but in fact the work was ultimately shortsighted (e.g., because of dubious assumptions, sloppy code, a misguided model, or an overly narrow view of the world), and the actions it inspires were ultimately harmful as a result
- I optimize for recognition and prestige (e.g., citations, patents, or political influence), but in fact the things that bring about the most positive change don't get much media attention and go relatively unnoticed

Impactful

Impactful

Impactful—work that changes the world counterfactually and for the better

This is about making the world a better place, full stop

In my view, this is ultimately what matters

And hopefully something we can all care deeply about upon reflection

Impactful

Of course, we each may have different intuitions about what it means to make the world a better place

And I believe it is fruitful for each of us to spend some time reflecting on what exactly it means to do good in the world

But ultimately, even if we don't all see things in exactly the same way

I believe that the world would benefit from more researchers who strive to do work that is meaningfully impactful—rather than solely interesting, illustrious, or influential

On the Pursuit of Knowledge for its Own Sake

Some believe that pursuing knowledge for its own sake is the ideal approach—that we should not consider the impact of the knowledge we generate, because it is impossible to predict

I agree completely that a sophisticated thinker should be open-minded to the wealth of possible paths-to-impact of one's work

And that seeking to improve our understanding of math, physics, chemistry, biology, and astronomy—for example—may be positively impactful for precisely the reason that it will likely improve humanity in the long run to understand these areas better

On the Pursuit of Knowledge for its Own Sake

But this is precisely what it *means* to consider impact

Indeed, a deeper analysis may convince one that while it is extraordinarily impactful to have several people working in these areas, on the current margin, it may be more impactful to focus additional energy elsewhere

And in particular, I disagree that even *considering* impact—for instance, to inspire one to work on improving the efficacy of our healthcare system rather than to ponder why we find the smell of roses pleasant—is something we should actively avoid

Closing

A Suggestion

I have found that it is very common in academic environments to say things that involve the word *interesting*

- “This question/project/idea is or is not particularly interesting.”
- “Do you think this question/project/idea is interesting?”

I encourage you to challenge yourself *not* to primarily value “interestingness” and hence **not to say it either**

Every time you catch yourself saying **interesting**, ask yourself if you are really thinking about the thing you want to be thinking about, and if maybe you should be thinking about if the project is **impactful** instead

A Suggestion

In my opinion, instead of saying

- “This question/project/idea is or is not particularly interesting.”
- “Do you think this question/project/idea is interesting?”

We should consider saying

- “This question/project/idea is or is not particularly **impactful**.”
- “Do you think this question/project/idea is **impactful**?”

Hats

When I'm asked to give feedback on research, I ask the person which of two hats they'd like me to wear

- my *economics* hat—focusing only on what might publish well and be interesting and exciting to economists
- my *impact* hat—focusing only on how impactful I think the project might ultimately be

I've noticed that I find it surprisingly easy to switch between the two, even though my questions, comments, and advice change drastically between them

I encourage you to try this yourselves—put on your field-specific hat and your impact hat separately, and see how different your questions, comments, and advice become

Thank you for listening!

Questions, comments, or concerns?