

# Altmetrics and the Scholarly Legacy

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## Summary

Altmetrics are usually most effective at capturing the attention and use of recent works. For legacy works (e.g. those older than 10 years), altmetrics are useful because:

- They can document renewed attention to older works and show some indication of why those works have received new attention.
- Social media in particular gives older works new life in online debates and discussions. For someone to reference an older work on social media, there must be a reason; these uses show some of what Crotty (2014) calls "meaningful" interaction.
- Upon a scholar's death, many colleagues and students take to social media to remember their life's work. The information they share can be helpful for archivists and others who document scholarly legacy.

## Introduction

Crotty (2014) distinguished between social media **sharing** and **attention** given to papers and argued that there is little correlation between the act of sharing a paper and making an informed comment about a work of scholarship. Is a work being shared because the author is a famous scholar and has a strong body of work, or is the act of sharing a comment on the value of an article? What are the parameters of "meaningful" social media engagement and how can we tell whether that engagement is meaningful or not? We study the altmetrics profile of Dr. Thomas Starzl for examples of meaningful engagement surrounding a scholar's legacy.

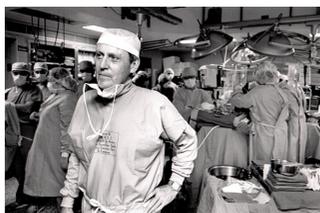


Figure 1: Dr. Starzl after surgery

## The Scholar

Dr. Thomas Starzl was a pioneer in the field of organ transplantation, performing the world's first successful liver transplant in 1967. After coming to the University of Pittsburgh in 1981, his work with multivisceral transplantation, immunological tolerance, and the establishment of organ procurement methods made Pitt an epicenter of transplant research. He donated his papers to the Archives & Special Collections at the University Library System, University of Pittsburgh; his publications were added to the institutional repository, D-Scholarship@Pitt, and from there added to PubMed Central. When he died on March 4, 2017, the world mourned - and shared the ways that his work impacted their lives.

## A View of a Scholar's Legacy

For works published decades ago to be raised in a new conversation, there must be a reason. In Starzl's altmetrics profile, we found two examples revealed in social media: adding evidence in online debate and personal remembrances of the impact of his work.

## New Controversies

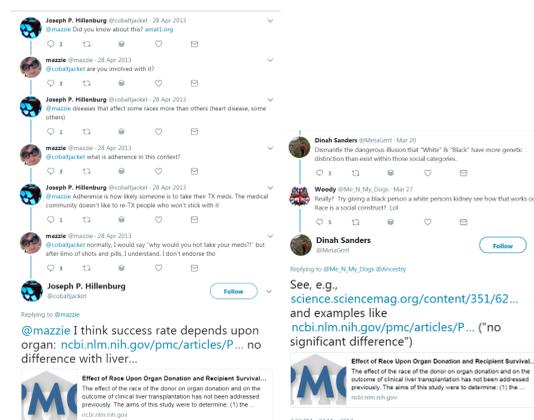


Figure 2: Two Twitter conversations about race and transplants, referencing a 1990 paper co-authored by Dr. Starzl ([bit.ly/StarzlRace1](http://bit.ly/StarzlRace1) | [bit.ly/StarzlRace2](http://bit.ly/StarzlRace2)).

A paper published two decades ago adds evidence to an online controversy about an organization's policy on race and organ transplants.

## Methods

Dr. Starzl's 4,070 publications were digitized and uploaded to the University of Pittsburgh institutional repository, D-Scholarship@Pitt. Optical Character Recognition (OCR) was used to create metadata, which was then checked against his CV for accuracy. The publications were imported into the altmetrics service PlumX, and Pitt library staff created a profile page for Dr. Starzl (<http://bit.ly/StarzlPlumX>). The statistics revealed high numbers of citations, though low social media engagement, not surprising for work that had been done primarily from the 1960s through 1990s. This PlumX profile and associated altmetric statistics are the basis of this study.

## Legacy and Memory

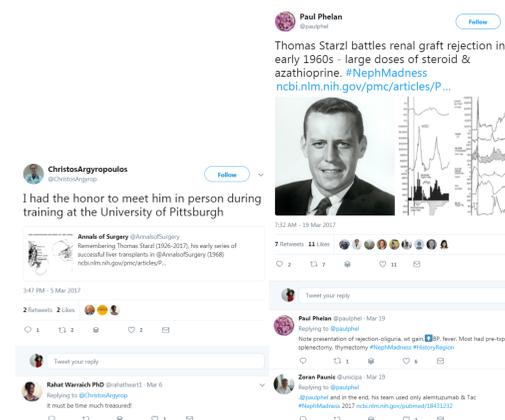


Figure 3: Two among hundreds of personal tweets after Starzl's death on March 4, 2017, sharing Starzl's impact ([bit.ly/StarzlLegacy1](http://bit.ly/StarzlLegacy1) | [bit.ly/StarzlLegacy2](http://bit.ly/StarzlLegacy2)).

After Starzl's death, *Annals of Surgery* shared his most famous paper. Colleagues & students commented to share his impact on their lives and work.

## Conclusion

Use of altmetrics for legacy scholarship is sometimes discouraged because social media attention is higher for recently published work (e.g. Peters et al. 2016); furthermore, promotional use of social media by journals and publishers can inflate the numbers, making recent work appear to be more used than legacy scholarship (Bornmann 2014). This work shows two particular cases where altmetrics can give valuable information about legacy scholarship. This information can be helpful for archivists doing work on a scholar's legacy, and a comfort for colleagues and friends.

## Further Thoughts

Altmetrics may be useful for legacy works in other ways. Here are some we came up with, and we'd love to hear your thoughts:

- Understanding public perception of scholarship
- Creating context for a scholar's impact
- Acknowledging anniversaries of historical events

## References

- [1] Lutz Bornmann. Do altmetrics point to the broader impact of research? an overview of benefits and disadvantages of altmetrics. *Journal of Informetrics*, 8(4), 2014. [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.joi.2014.09.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joi.2014.09.005).
- [2] David Crotty. Altmetrics: Mistaking the means for the end. *The Scholarly Kitchen*, May 2014. [bit.ly/crotty2014](http://bit.ly/crotty2014).
- [3] Isabella Peters, Peter Kraker, Elisabeth Lex, Christian Gumpenberger, and Juan Gorraiz. Research data explored: an extended analysis of citations and altmetrics. *Scientometrics*, 107(2), May 2016. [doi.org/10.1007/s11192-016-1887-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-016-1887-4).

## More Information

An article about this project is forthcoming in *Pennsylvania Libraries: Research and Practice* ([palrap.pitt.edu](http://palrap.pitt.edu)). Get this poster at [d-scholarship.pitt.edu/33189](http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/33189).