Most researchers I know have a love–hate relationship with metrics. People hate the idea of their research performance being simplistically summarized with numeric proxies for quality. But they cannot resist checking out these numbers, and sharing them with other people if they seem to be doing well (“my h-index is bigger than your h-index” may be a joke, but we laugh because we recognize the reality it mocks!)

We are in a period of expansion, as far as metrics are concerned. Ten years ago, we counted citations and downloads, mostly at the journal level. Around five years ago, the focus began to shift to article-level metrics – increased tracking of citations and downloads for individual articles (and their authors), and the emergence of alternative metrics, “altmetrics”, which attempt to track mentions of work in social media, traditional media, Wikipedia, government policy, clinical guides, and many more non-academic sources.

These new metrics are quickly becoming mainstream, with institutions, publishers and funders all working with providers such as Altmetric (known for its colourful “donuts” which signify the sources of attention) and Plum Analytics (which offers similarly stylish “plum prints”). Organizations vary in their application of this new data but there is a clear trend – with movements such as DORA [1] – to move away from over-reliance on citations, and to broaden the range of metrics that are used to evaluate research and researchers.

This creates a challenge for researchers, who need to become familiar with a wider range of metrics – understanding how they are produced, by whom, based on what data. It’s clear that while people want to keep on top of these changes, they have limited time for developing expertise in an area that is, after all, peripheral to their own research – however important it may be in terms of how that research is perceived or evaluated.

This is the challenge that my co-founders and I set out to solve when we started Kudos. We set ourselves the task of bringing together a range of metrics in one place, so that researchers wouldn’t have to learn for themselves about different kinds of metrics, or take time visiting different sites to understand the performance of their work – by using Kudos, they would be able to see downloads, citations and altmetrics in one place.

Viewing metrics is not enough
But we also realized that viewing metrics is not enough. People want to take more control of the visibility and impact of their work and not just leave its performance to chance. Every researcher I have ever spoken to feels frustrated at the growing use of metrics – but grudgingly accepting that if your work is going to be measured in this way, you are sabotaging yourself if you don’t take control of the performance of your work. There are many ways to do this, of course – from traditional approaches such as presenting work at conferences or sharing it with colleagues via email, to new options such as presenting work in academic networks or sharing it via social media. Again, my Kudos co-founders and I recognized a challenge here that we hoped to solve: with so many different ways to communicate your work, how do you know which is most effective when it comes to maximizing readership and impact?

Therefore, in addition to gathering a range of metrics together in one place, we also worked to provide researchers with a mechanism for tracking their communications so that the effect of outreach via e-mail, social media or academic networks could be easily mapped to “meaningful” metrics such as downloads, citations and altmetrics. By centrally managing your communications, across all your publishers and all the different places you might share them, Kudos enables you to see which efforts are correlated to improved metrics. From this, you can make more informed decisions about how and where to use your limited time for communicating.

The Kudos system has now been live for just over 2 years and over 100,000 researchers have signed up to use it. The Department of Chemistry and Applied Science (D-CHAB) at
ETH Zürich has been an early adopter of our institutional service, which provides staff with a view onto researchers’ communications in order that they can better support and amplify these to further increase visibility and impact. A recent study has shown that usage of the Kudos toolkit is correlated to 23% higher downloads. It is a free service that you can try by signing up at www.growkudos.com/go/ethz.

In conclusion, not everyone is convinced that metrics are a useful way to evaluate research but it is clear that, one way or another, they are here to stay. Many researchers have embraced options for communicating their work and are seeing improved performance against metrics as a result – whether intentionally or as a by-product of their efforts. In an age of information overload, many argue that you are doing your work a disservice if you don’t make efforts to ensure that it is found and applied by a broad audience. Ultimately, increasing attention, readership and citations to your work is a worthwhile outcome in and of itself, because of the increased opportunity that your work will be built upon by others, regardless of whether you improve the metrics in the process. So even if you don’t care too much about metrics, I encourage you take action and give your work the best chance of finding its audience. And I hope you will experiment with Kudos in the process so you can communicate as efficiently as possible, and keep your focus on your research!

References
[1] DORA – San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, see http://www.ascb.org/dora for more information

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