

Aristotle or Britney – who’s the most famous of them all?

Imagine, if you will, an *X Factor*-style contest for ancient philosophers. Lined up at the end of the show, shaking nervously inside their robes, are Aristotle, Plato and Socrates. After what seems like an eternity, the off-camera voice announces: “And the sage who will be going home tonight is... Socrates.”

Imagine no more. Yes, history has just got the hit-parade treatment, with the publication of a nose-tweaking new book entitled *Who’s Bigger? Where Historical Figures Really Rank*, which seeks to offer a definitive rundown on the world’s most influential figures – ever.

It’s the internet-created lovechild of two American authors, who have called upon both the modern-day wisdom of Wikipedia and the entire, extant body of literature throughout Christendom (provided it’s been published in a digital format).

Their not so modest aim was to ascertain whether Mozart beats Beethoven (he does, by three places), if the legacy of Luther outweighs that of Calvin (no contest), and if, at the top of the charts, the significance of Jesus outweighs that of Mohammed. It apparently does, though with Napoleon in there separating them at a surprise Number Two. William Shakespeare, meanwhile, just pipped Abraham Lincoln and George

Washington to the coveted fourth spot.

Not surprisingly, the book has been showered with both praise and scorn, attracting comments that range from “groundbreaking” to “a guaranteed argument-starter”. How, cry the critics, can there be only three women (Queens Elizabeth I and Victoria, plus Joan of Arc) in the Top 100? How come a hip-wagging Elvis Presley (69) squeezes William the Conqueror and John F Kennedy off the dance floor (at 70 and 71 respectively)? And on what grounds can a fire-breathing Genghis Khan (38) be so close on the coat-tails of a cigar-smoking Winston Churchill (37)?

Pelted from all sides with the academic equivalent of rotten fruit, co-author Steven Skiena stands by his findings. While accepting that *Who’s Bigger?* is likely to lead to the equivalent of bar-room brawls in college common rooms, he refuses to back down when it comes to defending his and co-author Charles B Ward’s methodology (Ward is a Google engineer).

“We have taken a bunch of different input variables and mashed them together to get a single number,” says Skiena,

a professor of computer science at Stony Brook University in New York State. “We analyse large data sets, including Wikipedia and millions of scanned books, and use that as a lens through which to judge who are the most important historical figures. We look at how long someone’s article is, how many times people read it. Our computers then come up with measurements that would correlate with any reasonable notion of historical significance. We then take into account any poll ranking, along with other data, such as the price you would pay for that person’s autograph.”

Two significant factors pop out with each character, says Skiena. “The first is their achievement-based renown, which we call gravitas. The second is how popular they are, which we call their celebrity. We combine these two factors into one final statistic, which we then age, in order to correct for the passage of time, to get that person’s correct historical significance.”

As he notes, “a figure like Britney Spears is going to score very high in terms of celebrity, but less high when it comes to gravitas. By contrast, Aristotle will score high on gravitas, but not very high on celebrity.”



So far, so reasonable. But the loudest criticism is that women and non-Westerners are under-represented. True, says Skiena, though he

maintains it's not down to him, but the algorithms. He is not making a value judgment, he insists, merely toting up the number of computer-generated references detected in predominantly English-speaking literature.

Or should that be American-speaking literature? There are a dozen or more US presidents in the Top 100, including the less-than-legendary Alexander Hamilton (45) and Grover Cleveland (98), while Mrs Thatcher languishes at 271, Tony Blair at 584 and David Cameron at a very un-special 1,483. Nelson Mandela doesn't even make the Top 100, while Ronald Reagan (32) edges out Charles Dickens (33) and St Paul (34).

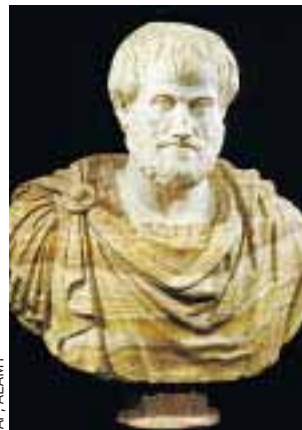
That said, the authors emphasise that the rankings are fluid, and that, as years go by, some high-ranking names could suffer from "reputation decay" (watch out Edgar Allan Poe at 54, and King David of Israel at 57).

Questions of global fame aside, they also suggest that this ratings system might come in useful for employers trying to identify the brightest candidates. "People are not as good at identifying merit as they think they are," says Skiena. "Of all the things that come out of our book, this element is one of the most fun and exciting."

And most sinister. In years to come, a job or a place at college could depend not on how well you perform at interview, but on how many people have read your Wikipedia entry. Best start doctoring it now.

'Who's Bigger?' by Steven Skiena & Charles Ward (Cambridge University Press, rrp £18.99) is available from the Telegraph Bookshop for £16.99 + £1.35 p&p. To order call 0844 871 1514 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk

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AP:ALAMY

Britney Spears scores points for celebrity in the book, but Aristotle wins on gravitas

