

WHAT IS THE WORTH OF A PUBLICATION?

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As the editor of a fairly new open access online journal I regard my mail with increasing concern. Scientific spam causes my inbox to overflow on a regular basis: Daily I receive between 5 and 10 invitations to submit my manuscripts to some obscure open access journal that does not even charge the author outrageous fees. Tempting, is it not? Never was the phrase “publish or perish” as true as today. Competition is fierce, and getting published in established journals might often take a lot of time. The length of the period between initial submission and publication date is something especially young scholars cannot ignore in their considerations where to send their manuscripts. While having a paper under review with a high impact journal may well be better than no publication at all, many opt for a lesser impact journal that gets the paper out in a more timely fashion.

A few years ago, colleagues complained about the limited options for publishing research dealing with evolved human behaviour. Since then, a number of journals have been founded, some open access, some not. How does an author decide which journal is the most suitable? How can you distinguish between a serious medium like the Human Ethology Bulletin and a bogus journal that exploits publication pressure as a business model? ISI impact has been the major quality criterion for the evaluation of journals for a long time. This is unlikely to change. A development to be expected due to the possibilities of electronic data availability, however, is a more detailed metric that focusses less on the journal, but on individual articles. For example, while impact of, say, Nature is high, there still exist Nature publications that have never been cited, i.e. they did not have any impact on the scientific community. Technically, such individual metrics are already in use for GoogleScholar, ResearchID, and similar systems. The main reservation against such metrics is that the number of citations is not necessarily linked to the quality of a publication. One recent example relates to the theme of the science spam: A paper titled “Get me off your f*ing

mailing list”, consisting of an endless repetition of this very sentence, got accepted by a bogus journal. While the paper met with a high degree of resonance in the scientific community, it will most likely not be cited for its scientific merit. An article can be cited for a number of reasons – either positive ones like: a) it documents a new methodology that is employed in consecutive studies, b) it introduces a new theory, c) its findings relate to the paper that cites the work; or negative ones, like: d) identifying the flaws of the methodology, e) disproving the theory, f) ruling out the accuracy of the findings etc. The impact of a highly cited paper on the scientific community is usually significant even if cited for negative reasons – it ensures we avoid making the same mistake over and over again. The number of citations – however – is not directly linked to the quality of the work. Also, citations take time: In fields like ours, it sometimes takes up to ten years until the importance of a paper is reflected by how often it is cited.

In pre-Internet times, doing your literature work was time-consuming and often tedious. You would physically have to go to the library, browse through card indices, dig out the volume (and often discover that the very one you are looking for is missing), give the paper a quick read to assess its relevance for your study, and then decide whether it was worth taking it to the photocopying machine, violating copyrights and spending a lot of money on said photocopies. Often, you would end up having to order it from a library other than your own, or have to visit several different libraries to accumulate the literature necessary for your research. Certainly, in such a system, many publications were never discovered, less through neglect, but rather through limited access. On the other hand, scientists were less endangered to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of publications, so they could be more thorough in their literature work. Accessibility of research findings became a totally different matter when academia discovered the Internet for their purposes. First, websites of journals, societies and institutions became access points for scientific updates. Social networks – both scientific and non-scientific ones – are now the great marketplace where we take measures to enhance our scientific impact, where we share ideas, find collaboration partners, and exchange relevant literature.

The challenge of unearthing specific papers has become an easy task – if you do not have access to the article through your institution, one of your friends might have. A post on Facebook has solved many problems for me. The ever-availability of information has generated a new problem though: Searches become more and more complex, as any keyword will return a huge number of hits, of which only a tiny fraction is relevant for your research. Like Cinderella having to pick lentils out of the ashes, we need to separate the good from the bad. Faced with a search result consisting of several thousand articles, we might wish for white pigeons to help us sort through the mess. So far, we still have to work this out by ourselves. We have to do the hard work, read the methods section, evaluate the sample size and assess whether the effect sizes are large enough to merit being cited in our own work.

Social networks might become the helpful birds we wish for: If we could establish a system that enables scholars to recommend good articles, we could complement citation

metrics with a measure that works substantially faster, and thus is more in the spirit of the pace of current scientific progress. I am excited to see what turn the whole system will take.

2015 is full of news for the Human Ethology Bulletin: We will launch our new platform, publish the Proceedings of the Brazil conference, and grow our Editorial Board. We will also keep you posted on the listings.

I wish you all a great year, new insights, happiness at work and in your private lives, and look forward to seeing you in Athens!