Understanding Impact: The Journal Impact Factor and Beyond

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The release of impact factors each year helps journals assess their ranking and influence in the scholarly arena. Journals should examine their impact beyond citations. This session provided an overview of methods used to track the impact of journal articles, including but not limited to the impact factor, which reflects the citations to an article.

Joelle Masciulli, Head of Content Strategy at Thomson Reuters explained how publishers use Web of Science (WOS) beyond the calculation of the impact factor. Publishers use WOS and Incites to understand their landscape, plan accordingly, identify experts, and manage information. Publishers also use WOS to increase visibility and monitor their competitors. She emphasized the rigorous building of the WOS database that includes page-to-page reading of journals, an editorial board, and a commitment to consistency and awareness. The Journal Citation Reports published annually by Thomson Reuters promises increased visibility, transparency, and easy access in the next release.

Betsy Donohue, Vice President of Digital Science, spoke about the changing landscape in research and how we can no longer measure by the impact factor alone. She noted that there are 44,000 citations of scholarly articles per day. Therefore, it is important for publishers to look at the outreach of an article past traditional citations. Donohue believes the impact factor, which reflects the citations to an article, can be a “lagging indicator” and may not tell the whole story. Altmetric is a data science company that tracks attention to an article. Altmetrics show the societal impact of scholarly publications through news sites, blogs, social media, and Wikipedia and can be used to complement citations. Altmetrics can help publishers understand and report the attention an article receives. They can also help identify hot topics, demonstrate innovations, and measure the success of published articles. Funders and institutions can see the broader impact of their work. Specific examples of how publishers are using Altmetric data are available at www.altmetric.com/blog/publishers-making-altmetrics-work-for-you/.

Adam Etkin, Founder and Managing Director of PRE, discussed how impact is more than just metrics, particularly for people in different roles. Authors, readers, and librarians all have various needs and require diverse tools when assessing impact. He asked, “How and why do we evaluate impact and metrics?” He used the well-known example of quantity versus quality. A paper that receives many citations or media attention is not necessarily a good paper. It may be getting attention for negative reasons. PRE, Peer Review Evaluation, is an independent third-party verification of the peer review process. Their flagship service, PRE-val, confirms that a paper has gone through review in the manner that the journal said it would. The PRE badge also displays additional data related to the peer review process, such as the roles of those involved in the review process, rounds of review, plagiarism screening, and more. The journal is given flexibility as to the level of transparency. Some journals elect to display the reviewer name and comments, but this is entirely up to the publisher. The PRE services are unique in that they provide information quickly and give the reader knowledge about the prepublication process. Etkin stated, “when talking about impact, take everything into consideration, including peer review, and not just numbers.”

Each speaker highlighted important aspects in evaluating the influence of a scholarly publication. The impact of a journal article is no longer limited to scientific citations but now includes many other factors, including social media, news outlets, and the peer review process.