

How to Help a Small Journal Become a Part of the Mainstream Literature

Scientific journals are today operationally divided into two large groups: those belonging to mainstream science and those on what is, in geographic terms, the scientific periphery.¹ The gap between the two groups is large and constantly widening: As few as 150 best journals account for half the cited articles, and a core of about 2000 journals cover about 85% of published and 95% of cited articles.²

In such a dichotomous world, what is the role and future of small journals? The term "small journals" is used here to cover a wide array of journals that are outside the mainstream and are published in the hope that they will be read and recognized internationally although in reality they achieve mostly a local readership. Many journals have other goals, such as continuing education and the provision of information to local readers in their local language, and they might have other problems.

We will focus here on journals that aim at but do not achieve international recognition. They are usually not listed in international bibliographic databases (such as MEDLINE, *Science Citation Index*, and *Current Contents*) and they generally cannot achieve the threshold of significant contribution to knowledge.³ There are thousands of such journals; they encompass journals from developing countries of all sizes—most of the journals of Asia, Africa, South America, and the eastern part of Europe.⁴ Regardless of their lag in quality and the reasons behind it, their existence is important and they should be supported not only to survive, but also to achieve an appropriate level of visibility.³

We are not proposing revolutionary international or local actions, but we believe that sensible, practical actions can achieve that goal. In this essay we will outline three levels of help in upgrading the work of small journals: self-help, mutual help, and help given by large journals

(Table). The proposed actions are based on 8 years of our editorial work in creating a small medical journal in a small country),^{5,6} the *Croatian Medical Journal*, which has now reached international recognition with its inclusion in the MEDLINE and *Current Contents* bibliographic databases.

Self-help: Small Journals Helping Themselves

In our experience this is the most important requirement for the successful development of a small journal. The key activity at this level is upgrading the work in small journals by the people who run them. This concerns mostly everyday work: It can be strengthened by the greater engagement of the editors and members of the editorial board. An editor of a small journal usually works free and serves the journal as a hobby. However, if one wants to build a successful journal, at least one editor must become at least semiprofessional. Potential authors of papers in small journals are less experienced in scientific writing, and the editors should assist them in preparing manuscripts before they are sent out for peer review.⁵ The list of reviewers should be compiled and continually refined according to the quality of reviews received, thus building a team of responsible and reliable reviewers. Journal records should be kept accurately. Passive members of the editorial board can be gently replaced by new ones with more energy and devotion to the journal. Manuscripts should be actively and systematically solicited. Ethics and editorial freedom should be defended. It is advisable to check references and galley proofs independently of the authors.

Another important issue for a small journal is the definition of its scope; concentrating on topics and subjects of local character but international significance is the way to increase originality. For example, small medical journals usually cannot

compete with large ones in classic aspects of medicine (such as cardiology, molecular medicine, transplantation, and large clinical studies). But they can become interesting and relevant by publishing reports on specific local matters that bear international importance, such as analyses of specific local problems (including failures), local epidemiology, and social and organizational aspects of local health care. Turning to its own potential and real subjects sharpens a journal's scope, increases its originality, and attracts authors.⁷ More than mainstream journals, small journals should pay special attention to the topicality and quality of the articles they publish. A small journal should have a defined readership and insist on articles important for this readership. The originality of the articles it publishes could stem from local or regional problems whose solutions are valuable for global medicine.

Small journals often live in isolation, mostly caught in a vicious circle of inadequacy.³ Reaching out of that isolation is as important as the activities suggested above. International contacts can be widened and maintained, starting with efforts toward exchange of subscriptions with other journals, thus enriching local libraries. Membership in international associations of scientific editors is particularly important, and participation in their meetings and workshops is a good source of knowledge and ideas. In medicine, the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) has taken major steps in globalizing its membership and providing professional support to fellow editors from less-advantaged countries. WAME is a virtual global organization, and its Web site (www.wame.org) is a great source of information on many aspects of journal editing.

Mutual Help: Small Journals Helping Each Other

Building relationships with other small journals increases the flow of information and knowledge in general, which itself opens new possibilities for collaboration. The collaboration can include exchange of journals, which increases visibility and moves free journals into local, often inadequately funded libraries. Reciprocal short-term (up to a week) or medium-term (up to 6 months) visits of editors increase experience on both sides. In addition to such editor exchange, author exchange is possible: Articles offered to one journal could, depending on the editors' definition of the journals' scope, be directed to a fellow journal. In our experience, authors generally like the idea and are thankful for the assistance. Such exchanges can enlarge the pool of authors and sharpen the focus of all journals involved.

Large Journals Helping Small Journals

The help given to small journals by large (mainstream) journals can be organized as an internationally supported and coordinated action of the scientific community. In our view the best medium for this type of help is the international associations of science editors, and some of them (such as the European Association of Science Editors and WAME) have or are developing help programs for medical editors. Large journals could be a permanent source of information for one or more small jour-

nals. This could involve a constant follow-up of the quality and achievements (and failures) of partner small journals and the provision of advice and assistance. There are several modes of exchange between a small and a large journal. Editor exchange can be organized as short- and medium-term visits with defined educational goals for the small partner. Journal exchange would bring an important and necessary journal to a community that usually cannot afford to purchase many journals. A small journal sent to the larger partner can find its place on the shelves of a nearby library at a university or some other institution and thus potentially increase its visibility. There could also be article exchange: The large partner could advise the authors of papers that do not suit its aims to offer them to the small partner; authors would surely appreciate the advice from a respectable journal. The small journal could solicit manuscripts for the larger partner on a particular local topic that is of interest to a wider audience (for example, human rights or public health issues). Such cooperation would benefit both the small journal and the partner: Editors of major journals would learn about different regions, learn to understand the needs and importance of local journals, and possibly develop a valuable source of interesting information.

In conclusion, we have a short message to fellow editors of small journals: If you want to increase the international importance and visibility of your journal,

you have to work at it. Help from different sources is needed, but only your hard work, dedication, and perseverance can do the job! 

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Table. Three levels of help for small scientific journals

Activity	Advice	Expected Result
Self-help: Work and dedication		
Intensify work	Be efficient and thorough and check every aspect of journal production; have at least one full-time editor	Improvement in every aspect of the journal
Work with authors	Prereview	Increased quality of articles; new authors are attracted to the journal
Reviewers pool	Create a computer list and upgrade it often	Better and speedier reviews and better published articles Better control of work in the editorial office
Records	Establish records and keep them accurate	Better work, increase in journal's importance
Renew editorial board	Gently replace inactive with active members; delegate tasks	
Solicit manuscripts	Be persuasive and persistent	Acquisition of better manuscripts and new authors
Keep editorial standards and defend your editorial freedom	Use a full review process for all manuscripts, closely match the publishing sequence with the acceptance sequence of manuscripts, and resist interference with your work	Increased quality of the journals and increased respect and trust of the authors
Check references	Check in suitable databases	Healing of a weak technical spot
Check galley proofs	Do it (also) yourself	Improved technical quality of the journal
Define journal's scope—find your niche	Direct journal's coverage to medical specifics of the local environment	Increased originality
Define journal's aims	Define the audience	Increased interest in the journal
Make international contacts	Join associations of scientific editors	Exchange of experiences and problems, acquisition of new knowledge, and increased visibility
Mutual help: Constant exchange		
Exchange information	Exchange experiences	New knowledge
Exchange journals	Regularly send journal to fellow editor or (better) his or her library	Increase in the visibility of all partner journals, and acquisition of new journals for your library
Exchange editors	Make short-term visits to other small journals, or work on a common "virtual" project (such as a better Web site)	New experiences and knowledge
Exchange authors	Redirect articles that fit with the aims of your partner journal	Increased author pool; sharpened scopes of both partner journals
Big journals helping small journals: Two-way learning		
Provide a reliable source of information for small journals	Be in contact by e-mail	New experiences and knowledge
Serve as permanent source of advice for small journals	Regular monitoring of a small journal	Improved quality and increased visibility
Train personnel from small journals	Short-term visits for specific needs	Increased professionalism
Exchange editors	Short-term visits	Learning
Exchange journals	Send your journal to a library affiliated with the small journal, and give the small journal to the library in your institution	Acquisition of expensive journal; increased visibility
Exchange articles	Carefully redirect articles	Acquisition of good articles and promotion of valuable research from small countries