

A Question of Impact

A research investigator has just completed a manuscript on hepatitis B immune status for submission to a journal and wishes to find the most efficient way to select a journal within the scope of her topic for publication. She has heard about journal impact factors and asks the librarian at her medical research facility how these might play a role in selecting a journal. What resources might the librarian suggest for learning about the relevance and use of impact factors?

Solutions

Selecting a journal to which to submit an article is a multistep process. Although most authors want their articles published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* or their society journal, this desire is not always realistic. I usually assist authors in searching for journals that publish similar articles. This process might be done manually by looking through journals that the library owns or electronically by searching the subject in MEDLINE. Checking the instructions for authors and reviewing articles themselves are next in the process to determine the best fit for the subject and type of article. The journal impact factor—the number of times that the journal's articles are cited by others—is not a primary consideration. It could be used in deciding between otherwise similar journals, but success in publishing an article is based on choosing the right journal, not on its impact factor.

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Your research investigator would first have to decide whether she wants to see a list of journals in immunology, hematology, infectious diseases, or a combination thereof.

Journal Citation Reports (JCR) (www.isinet.com/isi/products/citation/jcr/) is issued annually. The 1999 Web edition

just appeared, but it will also be available in CD-ROM format.

Using the subject-category search, she can select one or more of the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) journal categories. Under immunology alone, 115 journals are listed; they can be sorted alphabetically or ranked by citation frequency, by articles published, or by impact factor. She can then choose which journals might be appropriate, depending on whether the manuscript is a review essay or a report of primary research. She could try to publish in high-impact journals like the *Journal of Experimental Medicine (JEM)* or the *Journal of Immunology*. More specialized material might go to a lower-impact journal like the *Journal of Immunotherapy*. *JEM*'s 1999 impact factor is 15.6, higher than the *Journal of Immunology*'s 7.1. The latter published 1833 articles in 1999, *JEM* only 382.

However, *Transplantation Proceedings* and *Infection and Immunology* (an American Society for Microbiology journal) published more papers than *JEM*. There might be a greater opportunity to publish in a journal that can accommodate more articles.

In addition to *JCR*, ISI has a database called *Journal Performance Indicators (JPI)* (www.isi/products/rsg/products/jpi/index). *JPI* gives the user a more historical perspective (currently, 1981-1999). For each journal it provides a year-by-year record of output, total citations, and citation impact.

If she wants to know something about the relationship between journals, she can use *JCR* to look at the journals most cited by *JEM*, the *Journal of Immunology*, or any other title in the list. Alternatively, *JCR* permits one to view the journals most frequently cited by *JEM*, and so on. These citing- and cited-journal lists can suggest which journal might be the most appropriate.

Alternative strategies for selecting journals would include use of the *Science Citation Index* to find related papers on the topic at hand. The search strategy could include keyword and author searches (similar to

The situations described as new questions in this column are not necessarily based on actual situations, and the ones that are may have been modified to focus the question. Send your responses to the new question to Della Mundy, Department of Medical Editing, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, 1800 Harrison Street, 16th Floor, Oakland CA 94712-3429. Telephone 510-987-3573; fax 510-873-5131; e-mail della.mundy@kp.org.

a MEDLINE search) and cited-reference searches for the key papers that the author has included in her bibliography.

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The impact factor is a wonderful tool and, like such other tools as the hammer and screwdriver, is best used for the purposes for which it was designed. Like those tools, it is often used for a purpose for which it was not designed. I have been known to hammer a screw into wood to get it started and to open paint cans with a screwdriver, misusing these tools. Library committees and administrators have been known to ask how many of the library's subscriptions are ranked in the top 100 by impact factor. Authors, especially those seeking to rise within academic circles, have been known to seek publication in highly ranked journals. The impact factor bestows prestige on a journal title that reflects favorably on the successful author or wise librarian. If one wants to impart important and seminal piece of information that is expected to affect scientific thinking substantially, a journal in the appropriate subject field with a high impact factor is an appropriate place for publication.

Similarly, a library serving a research facility needs to give priority to journals with high impact factors for the relevant subjects. For smaller hospitals and clinics, it is much less important; only a handful of titles in the top 100 will be found on their shelves.

Now that I have retired, I can say that it

has sometimes appeared to me that promotion and tenure committees, in their search for objective criteria by which to evaluate the research of their colleagues, have given too much emphasis to the impact factors of the journals in which the candidate has published. Is this similar to opening a paint can with a screwdriver?

Lois Ann Colaianni

Retired; now a hospital librarian

**New Question:
A Question of Review**

A peer-reviewed journal published a book review. The book's author believed that the review contained an unsupported statement that greatly harmed his reputation. The statement in question was that the author's main point was already known and published in the literature; the author held that even a cursory look at the book and the literature would show this not to be the case. The author asked to be allowed to write a short reply to the review; the editor responded that the journal did not allow such replies by authors. The author then asked the editor to have the reviewer substantiate the statement in a private letter to the editor and the author; the reviewer refused that option. The author then asked the editor to publish a letter to the editor in which he could write a rebuttal to the reviewer's statement on the grounds that leaving the review unchallenged in the public record was damaging. The editor refused, saying that the Letters to the Editor column was not designed to include this kind of correspondence, that is, rebuttal of a published book review. The editor did not respond to further telephone calls or letters from the author. Does the author have a justified issue with the editor?