

A Question of Timing

This issue's Solution Corner question reflects the fact that many of the policy and procedural issues that STM (scientific, technical, and medical) publishers must deal with do not lend themselves to hard-and-fast rules that apply to everyone in the same way. In these situations, it is important that an organization have an articulated approach that is internally consistent and uses recognized industry standards, such as digital object identifiers (DOIs), appropriately. Certainly, many rules of the road in scientific publishing apply uniformly to all. But there is plenty of gray area in much of what we do, and in my opinion, that makes working in our field particularly challenging and interesting.

Question

I am the editor of a small regional journal that was more than 2 years behind in publication when I took over. We are catching up! Generally, our papers are cited with the cover date. However, some authors have asked about cases where precedence of publication is important, such as reporting the discovery of a new insect species or changes in taxonomic designation of species. One author suggested that papers be cited in the usual way with the cover date, volume, and issue numbers and pages but that the publication date be given in parentheses at the end of the citation, for example, "(published 2008)". I wonder whether there is a formal accepted way to indicate the citation year and the publication year. This is also becoming an issue with online publication in advance of print publication, and several Web sites have recommendations for those instances.

Solutions

One reason for collecting individual articles into a printed and bound journal is to create an archive of the article information. With electronic publishing has come the ability to publish individual articles before or without collecting them into a bound archive. Thus, there is a growing perception of separation between the electronically published individual article

and the bound print volume in which it ultimately appears. A print journal that is mailed to its readers in January 2009 and has "January 2009" on its cover may well contain articles with a copyright date of 2008 and a specific publication date in early 2008. Likewise, a journal that has a large backlog of manuscripts that are waiting for placement in a bound print volume may publish the articles electronically months or even years before they will appear in print. According to *The Chicago Manual of Style* (15th ed.), "for such articles, the real date of publication is the date of electronic publication (which should be included as part of the article's history), not the date, month, or season named on the cover of the print journal." Many of the journals published by the University of Chicago Press, including all the medical journals and science journals, include an article history (dates of original manuscript receipt, revised manuscript receipt, electronic publication, and so on). For purposes of establishing scientific precedence, that works pretty well.

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At the *New England Journal of Medicine*, we're not dealing with a backlog, but we do publish "online-first" articles with publication dates that are earlier than the dates of their eventual issue. The issue as a whole may be published only a few days later, but sometimes it is published weeks later, and the month and occasionally the year of the issue can differ from those of the article.

For all online-first articles, we include the date of publication online in a footnote that occurs both in the print (or PDF) version and in the online version. It consists of a single sentence: "This article (DOI) was published on [exact date] at *NEJM.org*." (For an example, see *content.NEJM.org/cgi/reprint/356/24/2457.pdf*.) The date and the DOI allow citation of the article as soon as it is posted online, regardless of its eventual issue date and in the absence of traditional citation information, such as volume and

page numbers. Such articles are listed in our e-mail notifications to readers and at *NEJM.org* as soon as they're published, first as Online First and then later, at the bottom of the page, as Upcoming in Print; they remain there until the relevant issue is released as a whole. Scientific precedence is established by the date of publication online.

We usually cite such articles as published ahead of print (and we match PubMed citation information, when possible), but we try to add issue, volume, and page information later, if we can get it, to make the material easier for readers to find.

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Your question is interesting. This is a continuing concern for many publishers and societies wading through their backlogs with authors eager both to see their work in print and to get the appropriate credit for their research. Various societies handle this in different ways. The American Meteorological Society (AMS) has Early Online Release (EOR), which gives the authors the option to release the preliminary PDF files that have been peer reviewed and accepted for publication. These are posted on the AMS EOR site listed by journal and ordered by posting date. Because these papers have not yet been copyedited or formatted, they are not the final version and differ from what will be the published version. The following reference format is used for citation: Author name(s), Year: Article title. *Journal name*, in press. The year is the year in which the paper was officially accepted by AMS. Once the paper appears in print, the correct reference format is Author name(s), Year: Article title. *Journal name*, **Vol. number**, page range. This year is the actual publication year (the year of record). For AMS, the print version is the version of record. AMS also lists the received and final form dates on the title page above the abstract for each paper. The "received" date is the date on which the paper was first submitted to AMS, and

the "final form" date is the date on which the author approved the final version of the manuscript. The received date helps authors to prove that their research was finished months before the article was published, so this might be helpful for authors who want to prove a discovery.

Nature has a similar option for authors called advance online publication (AOP). Papers are grouped by their online publication date. The papers are in final form and can be referenced as soon as they appear on the AOP site. Once in print, a paper is removed from the AOP site and included in that issue's table of contents online. *Nature* has a FAQ section that is very informative. (See www.nature.com/authors/author_services/about_aop.html.) It considers the "print date as the publication date" and uses both in its reference lists. It feels that its "role as a publisher is to provide clear documentation of the publication history, online and in print."

DOIs have become prevalent in scientific journals. They remain attached to their articles indefinitely, and this "persistent identification" allows access to an article online even if its initial location (the URL) has changed. More information is available online at www.doi.org. Some societies use these instead of page ranges in the format of their references for their articles. Once a paper is accepted for publication at AMS, it is given a DOI. This appears on the title page of the printed article. *Nature* uses the DOI in the format for its references to AOP papers: Author(s) *Nature* advance online publication, day month year (DOI 10.1038/natureXXX). When the article is published in print, the format changes to Author(s) *Nature* volume, page (year); advance online publication, day month year (DOI 10.1038/natureXXX).

However your society chooses to handle this situation, I hope that the above examples have given you some options. Thanks for posing such an intriguing question.

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