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The declining impact of the impact factor?

Impact factors have been, for quite a few years now, the single metric most closely associated with the 'quality' of an academic journal, or similar dissemination mechanism. This simple, perhaps simplistic, measure has been receiving an increasing level of criticism recently, of which an interesting example is a study (Lazano, Larivière, and Gingras 2012) showing that the proportion of highly cited papers coming from high-impact journals is steadily decreasing. This has received a good deal of publicity (see, for example, Cossins 2012), and is attributed largely to the effect of Internet search engines in making articles easy to find, whatever source they appear in.

There are a number of things to be said about this, from the perspective of a journal such as *Journal of Documentation*. First and foremost, we have always be wary about choosing a single metric as the measure of how well a journal is doing; there are other, and arguably equally or more relevant measures. One such, produced from the same dataset as the impact factor, is a journal's 'half-life'; a measure of the length of time for which its material remains useful and used. *JDoc* has always had a very long half-life, equal to that of the major review journals of the field, something in which we have taken great satisfaction.

There are also new metrics, appearing as scholarly communication becomes an increasingly digital business. The most obvious of these, though by no means the only one, is the number of downloads of articles. While by no means the same as an impact factor, this is an alternative, and arguably an equally, if not more, valid, way of assessing a journal's 'reach' and influence.

The most dramatic possibility, of course, hinted at by many of these new developments, is that the academic journal itself will undergo far-reaching change, as the viability of an information dissemination system developed to be produced in a convenient print-on-paper package is tested in an information environment which is not merely digital, but increasingly interactive and decentralized. It may that the effect of these changes will turn out to be so major, that the issue of the impact factor will come to be seen as entirely insignificant.

David Bawden

References

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