Against the Grain

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Editor

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How to measure the quality of scientific communication? Peer review bestows a seal of approval on a scientific article before it is published. After publication, bibliometrics attempts to gauge the article's impact—and the impact of the journal that contains it—in the marketplace of ideas. In this seventh feature of Elsevier's Information series, we take a closer look at bibliometrics and how publishers and librarians can employ it to upgrade science communication.

Bibliometrics is the name given to the science of measuring data in quantitative terms by collecting, counting and analyzing bibliographic citations contained in an article. A journal's "impact factor" is a measurement of how often a journal is cited by authors, based on the average number of citations per article over a given period of time.

The commercial pioneer of bibliometrics is the well-known Institute for Scientific Information in Philadelphia, Pa. Its Science Citation Index usually forms the foundation of a journal's bibliometric portrait.

BROAD MEASUREMENTS
It is helpful to think of a journal's impact factor as a broad measurement of the interest the publication generates in the scientific community. The higher the impact factor, the greater the likelihood that a wide range of readers finds its contents useful.

Publishers such as Elsevier use bibliometric measurements in a variety of ways to monitor quality and market trends. Articles and journals that score high on citation analyses indicate that things are on the right track; a pattern of low scores may signal the need for editorial adjustments.

Other kinds of bibliometric evaluations provide different indicators. A geographical analysis, for example, could show that a preponderance of articles originate from a particular region or country, to the exclusion of other parts of the world where valuable research is being conducted. Armed with this kind of information, publishers and scientific editors can try to devise strategies to ensure their journal contains the best material available worldwide.

LIMITATIONS
However, something as elusive as "quality" can never be adequately quantified, no matter how complex the measurements employed. When weighing a journal's impact factor, one must consider the type of journal. Basic science journals, for example, will often by their nature be cited more frequently than journals strictly devoted to applied science or clinical medicine. Moreover, review articles are heavily cited; journals that do not publish reviews may not be cited as often as those that do. Journals that specialize in lengthy articles can have a higher citation rate because they publish fewer articles per issue. And the size and the "style" of the research field can influence impact factors.

Another caveat applied to bibliometrics is that it cannot measure actual journal usage. It reveals how often an article is cited, but not how often it is actually read and digested. Publishers and librarians are of course very interested in measuring journal usage, and many libraries, such as Canada's Memorial University of Newfoundland, have conducted revealing studies of how materials are used. For their part, publishers are investigating new systems and technologies, such as the ADONIS document-delivery service on CD-ROM. Developed by a consortium of publishers that includes Elsevier, ADONIS automatically registers each time an article is printed out or electronically transmitted over a local area network.

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