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As I See It! Impact Factors and Usage Factors: Testing Alternative Metrics

John Cox
John Cox Associates Ltd, John.E.Cox@btinternet.com

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academic library in the U.S. that didn’t somehow do business with Blackwell’s. Their conference receptions and hospitality suites were legendary. They had veteran reps you heard about all the time. A few years into my career they had an online database for customers to order their books. Later, they had tables-of-contents. And they always had that thesaurus, which subdivided so many subjects into so many parts.

But above all they had England. The name itself, Blackwell “North America” said that the United States and Canada were outposts of a sort. England was home base, and not merely England, Oxford, where the Blackwell’s bookshop and its neighbor across the street the Bodleian were a pair of world institutions. At Yankee John Secor used to say, only half joking I think, that maybe we needed to buy a cottage on Lake Winnipesaukee to counter the Blackwell custom of offering hospitality to visiting American librarians at the family estate, known to us only as “the castle.” How many American professors had visited Oxford, had spent hours in the bookshop? Once more, can’t count. How many were comforted to know that their own library bought books from Blackwell’s?

One whose library didn’t — this was my customer, and so his library’s books were bought in New Hampshire — a professor of English History and even a journal editor in the field who taught at a remote state university campus, used to write an annual memo to the University Librarian arguing that the library should throw them out and bring back Blackwell’s, whom we had displaced to his everlasting frustration. Each year on my visits we’d face off, I’d hear all about Blackwell’s, and the memo would follow.

I’m sure this unlucky historian would rather have been conducting seminars at Yale or Princeton than on the campus where he did teach, but at least there’d been Blackwell’s before he’d gotten stuck with me. Meanwhile, we’d displaced Blackwell’s on quite a few other campuses. Their reps came to seem not so formidable. In fact through mutual curiosity we got to know them, and they got to know us, at conferences over drinks. A tavern on King Street in Charleston, now gone, was a notable venue for these summits, where it was impossible not to get awfully friendly as we exchanged our best stories about customers and about other vendor reps who didn’t happen to be present.

One time at a Charleston reception, as I stood with Dan Halloran, Blackwell’s president at the time, a mutual librarian-friend walked up to ask what we were talking about. “We’re fixing prices,” I said. How we wished we could have. This must have been almost ten years ago, but it was clear even then as we fought for accounts in contests that frequently established new discount thresholds and higher service bars too, that our industry was spiraling in an unhealthy direction. Smaller companies were the first to pay the price. In the U.S., Blackwell’s acquired Ballen and then Academic, and in the U.K., Heffers and then W.H. Everett. Everett, until that sale, in 2003, referred to themselves as the world’s oldest independent bookseller, founded as they were in 1793 and until the end embedding an image of St. Paul’s Cathedral in their logo. YBP, in the meantime, had picked up Lindsay & Howes in 1998, and so finally had a U.K. foothold.

It became difficult not to think about Blackwell’s as librarians so often had. Friendships were common across company lines and respect grew in both directions. I’ll always remember a boss telling me, once we’d begun to seriously challenge them and were feeling maybe a bit too cocky, “They’re a good company, believe me. They’ve survived world wars. They survived a depression.” At some point I visited the Oxford bookshop myself, and so had my own fine memories of time spent browsing the shop’s aisles and then, in a warm pub just doors away, inspecting the purchases.

So when the news broke recently, partly it was something everyone thought about in a business way, but partly in the vendor world it seemed a family affair too, one affecting friends. The phone calls and emails and conversations among people who’d been there across years, in one way or another, began at once and haven’t stopped. The other day I was talking to Wendell Lotz, now my colleague at Ingram, who reminisced that he’d gotten his start in the business at Baker & Taylor by being put in charge of transferring into the B&T approval system the profiles of libraries who were caught when Richard Abel went under. In turn I reminisced to Wendell that when YBP was acquired by Baker & Taylor, the leader prior to Blackwell’s, now dominates the U.S. market again, and far more than ever before, via the new YBP, whose U.K. foothold Lindsay & Howes — renamed some time ago as a by-product of an earlier acquisition — Lindsay & Croft, is now swapped to Blackwell’s. A couple of lessons, at least, are clear enough. One is that nothing stays the same for too long. Last month at a library whose account I visited the Oxford bookshop myself, and so had my own fine memories of time spent browsing the shop’s aisles and then, in a warm pub just doors away, inspecting the purchases.

As I See It! — Impact Factors and Usage Factors: Testing Alternative Metrics

Column Editor: John Cox (Managing Director, John Cox Associates Ltd, United Kingdom; Phone: +44 (0) 1327 861184; Fax: +44 (0) 20 8043 1053) <John.E.Cox@btinternet.com> www.johncoxassociates.com

The conventional measure of a journal’s “quality” is the Impact Factor, devised by Eugene Garfield as an indicator to scientists of the relative merits of journals in their chosen area of research. It is a ratio of number of citations in a given year to articles published in the journal in the prior two years. Impact Factors are calculated each year and published by Thomson Reuters in its Journal Citation Reports.

Impact Factors are used as a measure of quality or research impact. They are now used in ways that were never envisaged when Dr. Garfield’s simple guide for scientists was first formulated. Research grants, tenure and promotion are judged on measures that include the Impact Factors of the journals in which the candidate has published. Governments base their assessments of the quality of individual university research outputs on Impact Factors as well as peer review of published research. Libraries base collection development in part of the Impact Factors of journals in the collection or being considered for acquisition.

Authors want to publish only in journals with a high Impact Factor, which now assumes an importance as a shorthand measure of quality that was never intended, and which it should not have to bear.

It must also be said that Thomson Reuter’s selection of journals for indexing and citation analysis is heavily biased to STM — science, technology and medicine. Its coverage of the humanities and social sciences is much less comprehensive.

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None of this is intended to be a criticism of the Impact Factor as a quality measure of STM journals. It is accepted by the whole academic community and is embedded in today’s academic culture. It remains the best indicator of the impact of research that we have. Its value lies in its simplicity as a numerical measure. The problem is that it is used as a definitive measure in contexts for which it was never intended.

What the Impact Factor cannot measure is how useful journals might be outside the research environment. Journal articles are used in teaching undergraduates. They are read, and applied, by practitioners. They are used in industrial and commercial research in bringing new products and services to market, by people of great responsibility and expertise who, nevertheless, may never write an article, with citations, for publication. There is room for other metrics.

In 2007 the United Kingdom Serials Group (UKSG) funded a project to assess the feasibility of developing a Journal Usage Factor (JUF): a simple metric that itself would be a ratio of usage measured against the number of articles published in a given period. The resulting report (Shepherd P. T., Final Report on the Investigation into the Feasibility of Developing and Implementing Journal Usage Factors, UKSG, 2007) was based on interviews with authors, editors, librarians and publishers and on a Web-based survey of authors and librarians. It found broad support for such a measure, not to replace the Impact Factor but to complement it by providing an additional metric based on the use made of the journal, irrespective of whether that usage is for research purposes, for real life applications or for teaching the up-coming generation.

As a result, UKSG, in partnership with the UK’s Research Information Network, a policy unit within the university and research communities, commissioned a further project to explore the practical issues that arise in implementing a JUF, supported by an international group of publishers.

A Journal Usage Factor (JUF) has to be based on consistent definitions and standards of measurement. The COUNTER Guidelines provide that standard, which has become increasingly accepted as trustworthy throughout the scholarly community. The next stage of development is to test a JUF against a variety of variables — different publication periods, different usage periods, and different types of content — articles alone, or all content.

A number of international publishers are contributing usage data for analysis. Journals in five broad subject areas will be investigated: physical sciences, engineering, medicine and associated life sciences, social sciences and the humanities. In addition, two sub-disciplines where practitioner use is significant will be examined.

One of the early practical issues to be faced has been the reluctance of publishers to allow their usage data to be accessible by any third party. Such raw data is commercially sensitive, and most publishers see it as confidential and proprietary. As a result, if publishers are to calculate the JUF for their journals themselves, there has to be a robust and impartial system of governance that is seen to be trustworthy by the entire community.

There are parallels in other types of publishing. Magazines depend on their circulations (paid subscriptions, news stand sales, and giveaways) in order to price the advertising they carry. Advertisers and advertising agencies buy advertising on the basis, amongst other factors, of circulation. Magazine publishers calculate their own circulations — the raw data is commercially sensitive — but do so according to rules laid down by an auditing bureau owned by both publishers and advertisers. The Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) is universally accepted by all stakeholders in the magazine industry as trustworthy and authoritative. It audits the magazine publishers to ensure that the declared circulation is accurate and calculated in accordance with the rules. ABC has now extended its standard setting and audit to digital media. This provides an analog of the type of governance that will be required for the JUF.

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Technology Left Behind — DeepDyving into Journal Article Rental

Column Editor: Cris Ferguson (Electronic Resources/Serials Librarian, James B. Duke Library, Furman University, 3300 Poinsett Highway, Greenville, SC 29613; Phone: 864-294-2713) <cris.ferguson@furman.edu>

On October 27, 2009, DeepDyve announced the launch of its journal article rental services, offering access to scholarly journal articles for $0.99 per article. Likened to iTunes and Netflix, the California-based DeepDyve bills itself as the “largest online rental service for scientific, technical and medical research.” While DeepDyve is still in beta, there is a robust library of journal articles already available. As of December 3, 2009, over 32 million articles are available for rent from thousands of journals.

Content

DeepDyve is really two tools in one, both an A&I database, indexing content from a wide variety of publishers, and a journal article rental service, enabling users to obtain access to the articles found via the index. The DeepDyve search interface allows users to enter entire paragraphs or even longer segments of text, up to 25,000 characters, searching the deep Web, including resources such as government databases, patents, open access journals, scientific publishers and more. (Ojala)

Thus far, DeepDyve has focused its efforts on providing access to content in the fields of medical and life sciences. According to the Website, there are plans afoot to expand into other subject areas. The site boasts content from a long list of publishers, including Wiley/Blackwell, Taylor and Francis, IEEE, and a wide variety of society publishers. Noticeably absent from DeepDyve’s list of participating publishers are some prominent names, such as Elsevier, the Institute of Physics, the American Chemical Society, and Springer.

The full text of some of the content that DeepDyve indexes is freely available. Examples include articles from Medline or open access journals. Premium articles, those typically accessible via journal subscription, are available for rental through DeepDyve for the $0.99 fee.

It is important to understand that DeepDyve does not offer ownership of any content. Articles are strictly made available as a rental for a 24 hour period of time, and are viewed on the DeepDyve site, via DeepDyve’s proprietary Flash-based viewing system. (Ojala) The articles cannot be printed, downloaded, copied, pasted, or even screen-captured.

Some content in DeepDyve is labeled as Preview Only. These are articles for which DeepDyve does not have an agreement with the publisher to rent the article. For those users that are interested in obtaining Preview Only content or in long-term, permanent access to a Premium article, DeepDyve provides “Download A Article from Publisher” links, which direct the user to the publisher’s site where he or she is able to purchase the article for download or printing.

Pricing Plans

Under DeepDyve’s Basic plan, articles cost $0.99 with no ongoing commitment. Users create a free account, and then customize their profiles, entering words and phrases that indicate topics and areas of interest. DeepDyve uses this information to update the user’s personal DeepDyve homepage on a daily basis with articles that match the designated research interests. Users have the ability to bookmark favorite articles for easy referral, and DeepDyve maintains a complete history of every article that each user has rented and viewed. Users can also create alerts from their search results; the DeepDyve system will run the user’s query automatically and notify the user via email or RSS feed when new articles become available. Use of DeepDyve’s alerting and bookmarking features is free.

In addition to the Basic plan outlined above, DeepDyve also offers two different monthly plans. At a price of $9.99 per month, the Silver plan allows users to rent up to 20 articles per month, viewable for up to 7 days. The Gold plan, which runs $19.99 per month, permits users to rent an unlimited number of articles, viewable for an unlimited amount of time. Currently, DeepDyve is offering 14-day free trials of the Gold plan.

Payment for both individual articles and the monthly plans is handled via PayPal. DeepDyve does not accept credit card information on its Website, and, while the company is working to establish other payment options, at this time PayPal is the only accepted method of payment.

DeepDyving in the Library

While not specifically marketed to libraries, DeepDyve’s A&I index and article rental service present an interesting opportunity for libraries. DeepDyve does not currently offer an institutional or library subscription. However, there do not appear to be any restrictions prohibiting libraries from taking advantage of DeepDyve’s existing services and pricing plans.

At this time, if a library subscribes to a title through one of the publishers with which DeepDyve is partnering, the Download Article from Publisher link directs the user to the publisher’s Website, where he or she can access articles through the library’s subscription. As long as the user is coming from a publisher-recognized IP address, the user is given access to the full text and is not asked to purchase the article. I do not know if it is part of DeepDyve’s plans, but it is my hope that one of the next steps for the company is to OpenURL enable the site, allowing users to link from DeepDyve into those resources to which their library subscribes, whether it be electronically or in print.

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