

JOURNAL INDEXING, CITATION, AND IMPACT FACTOR: ARE THESE DIFFICULT TO ACHIEVE, AND DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

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Introduction

Index means listing something. In medical publishing, indexing is listing using structured vocabularies such as the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) used in Medline, and similar Emtree in Embase. Indexing for journals is the inclusion of their work: either the full article or, abstract in the database of the indexing agency. Indexing is a process where articles are submitted to a repository or, a website which acts as a platform to list the published articles in journals. Many Universities and institutions globally recommend their researchers to submit their work to the indexed journals. Many journals showcase their indexing list by highlighting it on their website. [1–3]

Many consider indexing as a calculation or, a symbol of the quality of the journal. Indexed journals are more preferred over the non-indexed ones. This is a wrong assumption. Actually, indexing is just inclusion of the article abstract or, full content to a database which makes searching the article easy if someone searches it in the particular database. It actually has nothing to do with improved quality usually. It is a matter which is debatable. Indexing might or might not be a matter of quality of a particular journal. The problem with these indexing databases is that which one is to be trusted? How to know which database used for indexing is of good quality?

Indexing may be helpful to make journals stand out from among many other journals that are in the publishing space. Indexing just increases the visibility of the journals and it is not correct to rate the journals based on their indexing. In earlier times of journal publication, Google was not present to index the trillions of websites and web pages and of course journal articles. Google was founded in 1998 by Larry Page and Sergey Brin which indexes all the web pages including journal articles. Journal articles having easily readable texts and search engine optimization (SEO) ready formats are easily viewable over the internet when a particular keyword(s) are searched. [4–8]

Journals must get more readers and authors. For the desired increase in their readers and viewers, which is directly proportional mostly to their website and articles visibility, availability, and readership. Indexing is like indirect advertising which is one of the ways by which journals can achieve this is by getting their visibility and they get indexed by one or more leading databases.

Indexing started about a century back in 1879 with Index Medicus till the computer age which started about two decades ago and, later changed name from Index Medicus to PubMed. Indexing access was provided solely by the paper publication of the Index which listed all the medical literature. Index Medicus provided timely indexed subject listings of the most current medical literature, was published monthly from January 1879, by two successive publishers before 1895 and both of those publishers incurred debt. Index Medicus never had more than 500 subscribers till that date. Professionals rather went for the actual articles than going for index published. Many other indexing services and websites have developed in the past few decades including PubMed Central, Medline, SCOPUS, Index Medicus, Google Scholar, and many others. Some of these are really good but there is no certain rule which applies to all and can determine the quality of those indexing databases. Hence, the topic of indexing and quality still remains debatable. [2, 3, 6, 8, 9]

A citation is the mentioning of another researcher's work or, any documented evidence when publishing work by another author. There are various formats for citing work including AMA, APA, Vancouver, MLA, Chicago, IEEE and many others which describes the format in which a reference be cited to make it uniform. The sole purpose is to make it search easily with a uniform system of citing work. The impact factor is related to citation and is a measure of the total number of citations an author received during a particular time frame of years. Similarly, journal impact factor is the total number of citations that different articles received in a particular time frame. Impact Factor is another controversial issue and researchers' work, as well as the journals, are considered to be having more influence if they are again and again cited by other researchers when publishing their work. This creates bias and actually may not be a good way of counting one's impact. Of course, good work may be cited more times but it does not mean that a rare work or, a different style work (though of great importance to science and medicine), if not cited many times and if does not have the so-called impact factor should not be good.

Citation, as well as impact factors, might be a way of measuring a research or article's influence but it actually does not always mean that quality increases with a citation or, impact factor. Impact Factor has been criticized by many authors as it has many variables which can be modified to project a wrong data with increased impact factor. These variables in calculation of impact factor includes coverage of database, language preference of the database, procedures used to collect citations, algorithm used to calculate the Impact Factor, citation distribution of journals, online availability of publications, negative citations, preference of journal publishers for articles of a certain type, publication lag, citing behavior across subjects, and possibility of exertion of influence from journal editors. Balhara published an interesting topic Indexed journal: What does it mean?, in Lung India Journal in 2012, which raises similar concern, and describes the challenges with the system of indexing, citations, and Impact Factor. Balhara has described a major issue with all these. Major highlights: Journal article publication has become a very important part of the academic and research career. Universities and institutions rate researchers based upon the publications and consider publication with more citation or, impact factor ultimately as a standard for researchers'-quality of work. Interestingly many universities also prefer candidates for funding during doctorate or postdoctoral levels with more citations, number of publications, and impact factor, which increases race for publication and Impact Factor. Even there are a number of Career Advancement Schemes in institutions which rate a teacher by the journal articles published, and Impact Factor. [3, 4, 8, 9]

The controversy with the measurement of quality of a researcher or, a Journal with its relation to total Journal Indexing, the total number of Citations, and achieved Impact Factor remains unanswered. There are many more indexing services by different organizations or, independently started and slowly helping with indexing articles systematically in different databases which appear equally good as the older available alternatives. Which one should be considered as a gold standard for submission of articles? Which journal to select for publication: indexed journal with relatively lower quality of published work than the un-indexed journal, or, un-indexed or, a new journal with the relatively high quality of published work? How to classify indexing? Should a journal listed in any one of the indexing services be considered indexed or, which indexing service is good and which one is not? How to rate and classify all of these where there are numerous indexing services (with high quality) available in this modern computer and internet age? Can Google and its great services like Google Scholar be considered the gold standard for indexing? Should good services of other numerous indexing bodies or, an individual indexing service be considered as a gold standard? The above questions need to be answered and are very important in publishing journal articles. [6–9]

Conclusions

It may be concluded that neither Indexing, Citations nor, Impact Factor can be considered as gold standard when rating a journal or, a researcher's work but it should be critically evaluated upon the type of work done, the methodology applied or, the importance of the research work done to the subject area and other similar factors. All these merits a very close look to highlight the topic.

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