

The consequence of stacking by Brazilian journals

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Peer-reviewed scientific journals, such as the Revista Brasileira de Hematologia e Hemoterapia (RBHH), aim to divulge the production of the academic community and leading edge research through publications.

The editors of the journals that receive these articles are the guardians of the entire evaluation process; it is their obligation to guarantee that the process is carried out within the ethical principles laid down according to previously determined standards. However, nuances of editorial policy peculiar to each scientific journal are common. The editor is responsible for balancing the scientific contents by choosing titles to make each edition attractive and to stimulate without interfering in the scientific merit so that authors improve their submitted manuscripts. Subsequently the works are sent to peer-reviewers who are savvy in the subject matter in order to evaluate, in the most judicious way possible, the scientific merit. On acceptance, articles are sent for publication within one of the different sections of the journal. Hence, the progress of this laborious process of evaluation differs between journals. In the RBHH, the system is double blind. All journals go along a lengthy course to obtain credibility and respect. Over the years they advance and become reference journals in their specific field and within the scientific community.

One of the most common wishes of journals, in addition to reaching the largest readership possible, is to be referenced, that is, there is a need to be in as many physical libraries, which nowadays are accessible via internet, be published in newsletters, and be indexed in the greatest number of electronic databases as possible. In conclusion, be accessible, available and indexed. This is the dream of every editor, and the RBHH has managed this and is today universally indexed.

For this to be achieved, an editorial policy of representing the Brazilian hematology community was followed. The RBHH represents four medical societies and within the framework of the works that are published in its pages today, it is the second most cited journal thereby demonstrating its acceptance within the Brazilian hematology community.

Since the 1950s, journals have been assessed according to several criteria with the measurement of the citation of articles within scientific publications being a way to evaluate the journal's importance⁽¹⁾.

Thus appeared the famous impact factor created by Eugene Garfield; this index now ranks scientific journals with the objective of defining the degree of importance of each, in the scientific environment and in its specific field⁽¹⁾. From the very beginning the author repeatedly wrote that this index had not been intended to evaluate researchers and that there was a distortion in its use in doing this⁽²⁾. Even so, in the last thirty years, this index has gained momentum and publishers began to use it as a prestigious index for the best ranked journals and consequently for the authors who publish in them. Consequently, soon publishers began to be under pressure to seek out the most renowned authors to publish in their journals and often to 'force' authors to cite articles previously published in their journal (coercive citation). This type of conduct still occurs but is condemned as unacceptable as it manipulates indexes, in particular the impact factor that today, despite serious misgivings, is the Holy Grail of editors and authors alike. One of the ways of creating scientific collusion is the famous technique of stacking in which journal publishers agree to cite articles of each other as a way of increasing the impact factors of all the participants of the scheme.

At this point I would like to introduce to the readers the declarations of the Brazilian Association of scientific editors (ABEC) and the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), as signed by Sigmar de Mello Rode, President of the ABEC and Abel L. Packer Program Coordinator of SciELO about the exclusion of Brazilian journals in the 2012 Edition of the Journal Citation Reports (JCR) submitted on July 3, 2013 to editors of Brazilian journals:

"Faced with the exclusion of the annual calculation of the impact factor in the 2012 Edition of the Journal Citation Reports of six important Brazilian journals due to anomalies identified in referencing, either by excessive self-citations or possible agreement between journals to publish articles with a high concentration of citations between them, the ABEC and SciELO reaffirm their uncompromising opposition to this and any other unethical practice in scientific

communication and recommend to the institutions responsible for these journals that their editors should properly analyze and elucidate these anomalies and, if appropriate, remove them.

The misuse of the impact factor in the evaluation of Brazilian research has, for years now, detracted the real meaning of this indicator and been harmful to the development of the journals.

Thus, as much as the assessment policies of Brazilian research hinder the progress of national journals, nothing justifies artificial measures to increase the impact factor and we remind you that journal editors are responsible for ensuring compliance to the principles of ethics in the communication of scientific research.

The ABEC and SciELO undertake to strengthen measures to qualify and control ethical procedures as an integral part of its development programs for national journals that fulfill an important role in the advancement of Brazilian research”.

In the last editorial of the RBHH, we highlighted the problems that occurred in relation to the use of the Impact Factor and Qualis classification of scientific journals and our anxiety to improve journals in the JCR ranking⁽³⁾. The desire of editors, driven by academic authors, has resulted in misconduct as described in the declaration of the ABEC and SciELO.

The conduct described, as a policy to misuse the Impact Factor, is not new and occurs in many countries; it has already happened in several fields of knowledge including in hematology and cellular therapy. This, however, is easier to monitor in the electronic age and more often than not guilty journals are quickly punished as happened to the six Brazilian journals mentioned above.

One famous case is that of the editors of the journal *Folia Phoniatica et Logopaedica* in 2007 who, as a protest against the “absurd scientific situation in some countries” related to use of the Impact Factor published an editorial that cited all the journals articles from 2005 to 2006⁽⁴⁾. There have been numerous other examples similar to this.

But what is the result of this? To punish and execrate editors in their eagerness to find prestige for and improve their journals? Is this right? Will these measures diminish the loss of importance of these journals? How can we recover the shattered credibility of

Brazilian journals as this information has been widely publicized to journal publishers participating in the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME).

Returning to my initial point, the devaluation of Brazilian journals; this began with the Qualis classification that is, in truth, one of the factors responsible for this distortion and for the stacking performed by Brazilian publishers⁽⁵⁾. The way forward is to stimulate national researchers primarily at the start of their career, encouraging them to publish in Brazilian journals, rather than choosing a journal by the impact factor, which is normally forced on them by their tutor who is sometimes only interested in the curriculum. The path to be followed is to enrich national production, reduce the low national esteem syndrome of not citing Brazilian authors or articles published in national journals and to enhance the bibliometric indices with the Impact Factor and others in their correct place in importance. After all a publication in the RBHH or in the vast majority of Brazilian journals edited in English which is the technical *lingua franca*, is available in most of the world’s databases and can be consulted and assessed by all.

Ah! And without forgetting to change the Qualis classification and its criteria.

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