

EDITORIAL

Why we publish, where we publish and what we publish?

As scientists we all publish something though the difference in frequency of publication by different scientists may vary more than the difference in the speed of the proverbial rabbit and tortoise. *Why we publish* can have two motivations. The traditional or philosophical motivation for publishing is to share one's incremental knowledge and/or understanding with peers across the world and claim the pleasure of priority. However, the more common and "pragmatic" reason for publishing in the current competitive, rather combative, world is to secure a better "academic performance index" (API) score over others. The API score being a numerical value, speed, measured by the number of publications in a given period of time, becomes an important quantifiable component. The other contributor to the all important API score is the much abused impact factor (IF). Thanks to these "quantifiable" parameters, the story of "slow but steady" tortoise winning the race does not, unfortunately, hold in current times. On deeper analysis, these two reasons for publishing may not really be mutually exclusive. However, the emphasis and purpose becomes different. When one wants to share the new found knowledge with others, the emphasis is "our/my results show or reveal", while in the other case, it would be "our/my results also show or confirm" . The former advances our knowledge base while the latter merely confirms what someone else reported earlier. Confirmation is important but the prolific investigator who mostly keeps on confirming others' findings does not get into the leadership slot.

In current times, notwithstanding the incisive debates and the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (<http://am.ascb.org/dora/>), the IF of a journal continues to rule the roost. Therefore, *where we publish* is largely determined by the IF. In a pithy editorial in a recent issue of EMBO Reports, Jacobs (2014) lists three trends that determine the

current scientific publishing with "the poisonous power of the journal impact factor (IF) somehow lurking behind all three. First comes the entrenched dominance of the prestige titles, with stratospheric IFs. Getting published there is crucial for both aspiring and established investigators. The beneficiaries applaud the system, whilst the majority grumble bitterly" (Jacobs, 2014). I, and of course many others, have discussed earlier that how the IF bug has severely affected growth of many potentially good journals published in India and other developing or under-developed countries (Lakhotia, 2013, 2014). On the other hand, the API-boosting motivation for publishing papers has led to mushrooming of journals which are either compelled to publish "something" to sustain themselves or are willing to publish anything for a fee (Lakhotia 2013, 2014).

The IF consideration also affects *what we publish*. As Jacobs (2014) puts it "top journals typically apply a "significance filter" to all submissions. Editors have to assess whether the topic addressed is of wide interest and importance and constitutes a substantial advance for the field. In other words, will the paper spark sufficient interest to be widely cited?". Therefore, the "appeal" of a given paper in the eyes of the Editor and reviewers decides what should be published, rather than the significance perceived by the authors who wish to share their findings and views with peers. A long-term adverse effect of this is that instead of "curiosity-driven" science, we succumb to technology-driven "appealing" science. Very often the editors and reviewers of the high IF journals place direct or indirect pressure on authors to use automated and "advanced modern" technology, irrespective of whether these were logically required or not. This is further aggravated by aggressive marketing of the so-called sophisticated and high-technology driven ever-metamorphing gadgets and machines so that

investigators get tempted to formulate their new research projects around a question that justifies the need for the new technology rather than around a question driven by intuitive curiosity and hypothesis (Lakhotia 2009).

The net result is that the state of academic publishing is in a rot so that it “feels harder and harder to disseminate our findings and our ideas, and we are all wasting way too much of our time facing up to rejection letters, shopping around for the next journal, or reconfiguring our data to fit what will be seen as a sexy story.” (Jacobs, 2014). *Let’s face it, this rot is of our own making*, a sentiment also expressed by Johnston (2013) in his thought provoking editorial in *Genetics* with a title, “We have met the enemy, and it is us”, that speaks for itself.

Only a change in culture and mindset of publishing scientists, especially the seniors who sit on the “judgment chairs”, can take us out of the rut and make research and its publication a real pleasure,

not only for the authors, but also for readers. Why we publish, where we publish and what we publish should be our pleasure rather than compulsion.

References

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S C Lakhotia

Editor-in-Chief

Proceedings of Indian National Science Academy

E-mail: lakhotia.eic.insa@gmail.com