

Charity Starts at Home: Emerging Journals Should Receive “Positive Discrimination” by Their Regional Academia

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Abstract

Scientific journals are published by commercial, no-profit, or society publishers. Most of these publishers and journals are based on the West, with the resulting gap between North and South in research work and literature productivity. This situation has resulted in a falsely perceived doubt about the value and validity of the submissions to international journals from developing regions. However, a recent increase in scientific productivity resulting from some countries' investments made into research was associated with developing many emerging national or regional journals. These journals aim to overcome barriers facing authors from producing regions to get their scholarly work published. They also aim to increase the research capacity and foster a culture of South-South collaboration. However, emerging journals face many challenges including a lack of recognition on their grounds. In this personal paper, the challenges facing emerging journals are highlighted, and the proposed urgent need for “positive discrimination” for emerging journals by regional academia is argued.

Keywords: Alternative bibliometric indices, bibliographic databases, English lingua franca, journal impact factor, nonmainstream science, periodicals as a topic, publication ethics, scientific evaluation scientific journals scientific literature, scientific publications

INTRODUCTION

Vast numbers of journals are dedicated to publishing scientific research. Medical journals are published by commercial, no-profit, and society publishers in numerous languages and with a wide range of content. Most of these publishers and journals are based on North America and Western Europe. A considerable gap between the South and North in the research productivity is observed.^[1] Consequently, there is a predictable proportionate difference in the contribution to the global literature production.^[2]

In this personal paper, the challenges facing emerging journals are highlighted, and the proposed support by “positive discrimination” for these journals by regional academia is argued.

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EMERGING JOURNAL

A recent increase in scientific productivity resulted from the investments made into research by some emerging economies: many emerging national or regional journals developed for several reasons.^[3] First, to overcome the perceived dominance of international journals, second, and to address the significant barriers that their scientists face, and third, the recent greater scientific productivity.^[4,5] Barriers to getting published include the generally lower or more variable quality of the science produced in emerging countries and poor command of written English, the primary language of modern science. Although English is not as great a barrier as some may claim, there is evidence of a conscious or subconscious bias among reviewers and editors in judging submissions from developing countries.^[5,6]

There are also fundamental differences between the publishing enterprise in developed countries and emerging countries regarding the commercial rationale behind their journals. Sometimes, doctors in the diaspora helped their fellow countrymen

launch medical journals.^[5-7] Admittedly, it is hard for emerging journals to secure scientists’ expertise to review their submissions.^[8] Furthermore, the reviewers who do agree may be more lenient, thinking that peer review as rigorous as that of international journals would run counter to the purpose of making scientific results publicly available, at least on the national level.^[3]

HOW CREDIBLE ARE EMERGING JOURNALS?

Nonpredatory emerging journals’ sole aim is to overcome barriers facing authors from developing regions to get their scholarly work published, support the capacity of research, and publishing and foster a culture of South-South collaborations. Distinguishing emerging non-predatory from predatory journals is illustrated in Table 1. Bocanegra-Valle^[9] examined a group of open access (OA) journals against a particular set of quality requirements and observed more to journal credibility than impact factors (IFs). He also noticed that OA journals offer a window of opportunity to ensure good scientific practice and maintain quality assurance standards in scholarly publishing.^[9] They found three main concerns. These

Table 1: Recognized features distinguishing “legitimate genuine emerging” journals from predatory

Predatory journals	Legitimate “genuine” emerging journals
Strange names are unrelated to content*	Titles primarily reflect region or subject
Nonbiomedical interests	General medical or specialist interest
An unprofessional website with many errors	Professional website
Editorial board members come from various unrelated groups and regions (may not be verifiable)	Editorial board members have something in common (specialty, region, etc.) and are verifiable with full affiliation and contact details
Unclear or touched-up editors’ images	Editors’ images are reproduced to the best abilities
Website home page speaks to authors	Websites and editors speak to the readership
Uses unusual indexation and impact factors	Openly declares nonindexation status
No description of the publishing process	The publication process is described
The nonverifiable peer review process	Verifiable peer review processes**
Asks for manuscripts to be submitted by e-mail	Manuscripts are submitted on websites
Promises quick turnaround and publication	No promise of speedy publication
No retraction policy	Explicit withdrawal and retraction policy
No information on how content will be preserved	Publishing and preservation stated
Low article processing charges	Usually free submissions
Lack of copyright clarity	Mostly open access copyright
Journal e-mail is generic (Hotmail, Yahoo, Gmail)	Usually institutional e-mail
“So-called publishers” publish a vast number of unrelated titles in a wide range of subjects with interrupted flow***	Affiliated societies are focused on one or a few journals with continuous flow**
Typically (many volumes 1, number 1) are released simultaneously, with volumes having a few articles	Steady growth and maturation of the journal

*Commonly used International and Asian prefixes, some are linguistically and conceptually erroneous. No examples are quoted to avoid legal implications,

Some publish details of peer reviewers at the end of articles on an individual basis, *The whole publishing process is owned by a physical or virtual “name of publisher” that may not be found

are strict compliance with publishing schedules, safeguarding of peer-review assessments, and the prevention of institutional inbreeding. These three global concerns strengthen the multifaceted reliability in terms of “presumed,” “reputed,” “surface,” “experienced,” “verifiable,” and “cost effort credibility”. He also found that website errors or missing information lead to distrust or, at the very least, to suspicion. They may also be an indication of poor professional commitment. The more visible and transparent the information about the selection of manuscripts and the assessment process or the scientific quality of a journal, the more reliable, and credible the journal will be. Finally, he stressed that some requirements are key for quality because, whether mandatory or weighted, they are interrelated, and noncompliance will affect the outcome, which eventually undermines the journal’s “reputed” and “verifiable credibility.” Meyer^[10] explored the economic factors that shape the market in electronic journals and describes the potential for library efforts to cope with this market. Many academic community members have placed substantial hope in the expectation that scholarly reporting will migrate to the electronic environment, where authors, librarians, and academic institutions will control distribution.

THE DOMINANCE OF ENGLISH AND THE FADING MYTH OF “TOP” JOURNALS

Scientists tended to publish exclusively in English, assuming that this will make their articles more visible and cited. This hypothesis was tested by

comparing the effect of language on the citations of articles published in journals that publish papers in either English or other languages.^[6] Articles published in English had more citations than those published in different languages when other factors were controlled. This trend may be due to English articles being accessible to a larger audience; therefore, academic institutions should be aware of this situation and improve the teaching of English, especially in the natural sciences.^[6]

Over the past two decades, the highest-quality work has been published in an increasingly diverse group of journals.^[11] Furthermore, several new and established journals publish an increasing proportion of the most-cited articles.^[11] These changes brought new challenges and opportunities for all parties. Researchers can now publish their work in more diverse venues knowing that they can still reach the same audiences.

WHAT ARE THE ASPIRATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF EMERGING JOURNALS?

The aspirations and challenges facing are highlighted in Table 2. The establishment of national journals has, in effect, provided two parallel streams for scientists in developing countries. Publication in international journals would be deemed the selective route and publication in national journals the regional route.^[12] Based on their perceived chances to be accepted by an international journal, authors can choose the route that gives them the best opportunity to publish their findings. Right economic conditions

Table 2: Challenges and aspirations of “legitimate emerging journals”

Aspirations	Challenges
To promote local, national, and regional research culture	No indexation (particularly Scopus and Medline)
To improve local, national, and regional scientific writing and publishing skills	Articles may not be counted for academic promotions
To provide a supportive editorial policy	Low visibility
To fight predatory publishing by being an alternative genuine journal	Low submission rates resulting in relatively high acceptance rates
To be a platform for local, national, and regional clinical and professional issues*	Having to defend the “predatory” accusations
To provide unrestricted open access for readers from LMIC’s	Financial difficulties: (Primarily for online hosting fees and publishing costs)
To waive all charges for authors	Low profile or no institutional affiliations
To promote south-south collaboration	Lack of confidence from local academics
Providing own English copyediting services	Low competitiveness with established
A quest to achieve high quality at a low cost	Low-profile publishers
	Unwilling and inadequate quality peer-reviewers

*Which may not be of interest to international editors. LMIC’s: Low and middle income countries

are also necessary as the resources to produce national journals come from the government or state-owned institutions. National journals may face budget cuts in times of austerity. In the worst-case scenario, this may lead to the demise of national journals to the disadvantage of authors who built their careers by publishing in them.^[13] There are two other external threats to the emerging journals. First, the highly competitive international publishers keep producing clones and gold OA titles. They are more capable of attracting authors and the almost guaranteed indexation opportunities. The other threat comes from the ever-increasing predatory journals that the unwary cannot discover.^[14-16] However, the main threat comes from within. For instance, many universities insist on promoting staff in many developing regions, published in journals with a specified IF or at least indexed PubMed (or major publishers-owned indexes). These requirements happen despite their knowledge of the nonexistence of such journals locally or regionally. The practice of regional universities deprives national and regional journals of the primary source of relevant submissions counted by the journals as central to their niche from their natural “constituency” for whom these journals were launched in the first instance.^[7,13] This problem is complicated by a low flow volume and high acceptance rates reviewed strongly negatively by indexation agencies. Consequently, it does reduce the chances of success in indexation applications for many years. This scenario widens the gap between local and international journals in all sorts of publication metrics. The latter can secure indexation in a brief time supported by the track record of their publishers and by submissions attracted from all over the world^[13] [Figure 1].

Pressure on academics to publish in high-impact journals continues to grow despite some calls to limit this trend.^[16] Consequently, journal rankings purporting to guide the quality of journals have proliferated. Editors become more preoccupied with the ranking of “their” journal and started to exercise performative power over authors by setting standards for publication that exclude many and compelling others to adapt to editors’ styles, priorities, and imperatives.^[17,18]

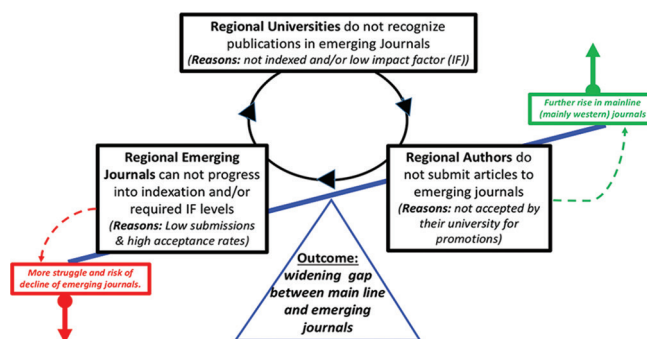


Figure 1: Schematic representation of the antagonistic interplay between universities, authors, and emerging journals in a vicious cycle creating and axis drive emerging journals down and mainline journals upwards in all metrics

IS “POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION” A FAIR MEANS FOR A JUST CAUSE?

Ibegbulam *et al.*^[19] revealed that academics thought IF is better used for assessment in an environment that supports quality research. Indeed, IF is detrimental to the growth of the local journals. There is a perceived high rejection rate of manuscripts from developing countries. Insistence on IF can potentially influence job satisfaction and the commitment of academic staff.

The interplay between the practices of academic institutions, local authors, and its impact on the balance between the exponential rise in volume, activities, and status of established journals and the perpetual decline and the possible demise of emerging journals is illustrated in the schematic model [Figure 1]. The fate of genuine emerging journals cannot be viewed separately from the explosion in titles produced by the international publishers mainly using the gold OA model on one side and the threat from predatory journals. Therefore, universities and academic institutions should consider supporting genuine emerging journals in their own countries and regions to redress the balance between the north and south. They should not impose conditions that cannot be met many years after these journals’ launch in a highly competitive environment. Regional universities and academic institutions can take several steps to support local/regional emerging journals with no harm to the mainline journals [Table 3]. These measures can boost the status of the emerging journal and leave the editors to concentrate on the

Table 3: Potential strategies to support “legitimate emerging journals” by regional universities and academic institutions

Time-limited waiving of the conditions of impact factor and indexation status for articles published in emerging journals when used to promote their academic staff, e.g., first 5 years

Allowance of a proportion of articles when used to promote their academic staff published in promising emerging journals beyond the initial waiver period even before international indexation, e.g., 25% of publications submitted in support of the promotion of their academic staff

Establish some formal links with the journals to allow the universities to gain insight into the publishing standards and practices, e.g., via membership of the editorial boards by designated academics

Designation of existing emerging journals as the University’s official publication as soon as they are established and most certainly as soon as they are adequately indexed rather than creating new ones. A single journal can be the designated official body for a few bodies

Utilization of emerging journals to publish regionally relevant scholarly work such as abstracts of academic meetings, summaries of a research dissertation, and academic theses

Financial support as educational grants or advertising on the pages/ websites of the journal

quality of work rather than being anxious about the flow of submissions, financing, and risk of demise.

CONCLUSIONS

The relatively low interest of international journals in issues and work submitted from developing regions is very evident. Too often, these submissions are rejected on the commonly used justification “*perhaps suitable for the local or national journal!*”. However, authors from developing regions remain eager to publish in “indexed” journals to be internationally visible and locally recognized for professional promotion. Hence, these authors suffer a double-sided challenge. “*Charity starts at home*” may be represented by a “*positive discrimination*” for emerging journals by universities in their regions.

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Compliance with ethical principles

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