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Visibility, Credibility, Prestige: Evaluating the Implications of Indexing African Journals

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Abstract

Start-up problems for a journal include attracting authors and building initial readership, but challenges further down the line include building visibility and maintaining credibility. One of the key strategies in this regard is indexing. According to the literature, the main reasons for having a journal indexed or listed in an abstracting service relate to visibility, and to quality, in terms of credibility and prestige. In this paper, I will look at each of these in more detail. For concrete examples, I will draw upon my experience with indexing an interdisciplinary journal in the social sciences, *Africa Insight*, of which I am currently the editor. Our experience, in a nutshell, has been that getting the journal indexed does create more visibility, and that it certainly confers some credibility – but it has had little effect on the bottom-line of subscriptions and sales.

Key terms: visibility, credibility, prestige, subscriptions, accessibility, indexing, abstracting.

Résumé

Les problèmes de démarrage d'une revue consistent notamment dans les difficultés à susciter l'intérêt d'auteurs et à s'assurer un lectorat initial, mais il y a d'autres défis qui l'attendent en aval, dont la nécessité de se forger une notoriété et de préserver sa crédibilité. À ce propos, l'indexation figure au nombre des stratégies clés à adopter. À en juger par la littérature en général, les raisons majeures de faire indexer ou cataloguer une revue résident dans le souci de notoriété et de qualité, en termes de crédibilité et de prestige. L'étude traite chacun de ces facteurs, avec des exemples concrets à l'appui, tirés de l'expérience de l'auteur en matière d'indexation d'une revue interdisciplinaire de sciences sociales, *Africa Insight*, dont elle est actuellement la rédactrice. L'indexation de

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la revue la fait mieux connaître et lui confère assurément une certaine crédibilité, mais cela a une incidence minime sur le chiffre des abonnements et des ventes.

Mots clés: notoriété, crédibilité, prestige, abonnements, accessibilité

Introduction

Every year, millions of new journal articles are published, and new journals are started. Start-up problems for a journal include attracting authors and building initial readership, but further down the line the challenge is how to stand out from the mass of other literature in your field. How do you make readers notice your journal? And, when they do find your journal, how can they be sure that yours is worth reading? How do you attract new authors? And how do you attract subscriptions?

In other words, the challenge is to build visibility and then to maintain and advertise your credibility. Or, to use the three criteria of Kling and McKim (1999) that measure whether or not a scholarly document is effectively published, you need to measure and improve your journal's publicity, trustworthiness and accessibility. They define these three criteria as follows:

- * **Publicity:** the document has to be announced to scholars so that they may learn about its existence. Publicity can be represented by a continuum of activities like subscriptions, reports lists, abstract databases, and citation.
- * **Trustworthiness:** the document has been subject to a social process that assures readers that the content of the document satisfies the norms of quality accepted by the community. Trustworthiness is typically marked by peer review process, social status of the journal, and publishing house quality, but less formally may also be based on the author's reputation and institutional affiliation.
- * **Accessibility:** readers must be able to access the document in a stable manner over time. Libraries, publishers and clearinghouses typically assure accessibility, by distributing and storing the documents.

In this paper, I will be looking at indexing from the point of view of two of these criteria – publicity (visibility) and trustworthiness (credibility). Accessibility is probably the main aim of indexes, but it serves an important purpose in terms of the other two as well.

The main purpose of indexes is simple: they are there to help people – primarily researchers, students and librarians – to search among the millions of articles available, and find articles that are both relevant and of good quality. In other words, the ability to identify academic journals that

publish high-quality research is intended to help researchers to select the most up-to-date literature in their field. Louisa Ha (2003: 193–94) states the case emphatically when she includes among the criteria a journal must meet: “to justify its existence and meet the needs of users and authors”, to “be accessible and retrievable easily through various indexing/search services and databases”.

Two caveats:

the exclusion of a journal from an index does not automatically mean that it is not relevant, or that the journal is not peer-reviewed; on the other hand, inclusion in an index also does not automatically mean that more people will find and read your articles.

African journals are, on the whole, poorly covered by the international indexes. To give one example, Adomi and Mordi (2003: 259) note that ‘very few Nigerian journals – less than 10% of the whole – are covered by indexing and abstracting services’. We need to look at some of the reasons for this, and we also need to develop strategies to ensure that our journals are well represented on all relevant indexes – possibly, we also need to develop new indexes, that showcase our research in better ways. This is important if we want to be able to make a real contribution to scholarship; we also require recognition for the very good work that is being done in Africa.

Visibility

Increasingly, we are being asked to think on a global scale when looking at publicising our journals – especially since the general thinking is that journals about Africa should, at the very least, reach all of Africa. Readerships are becoming more global, and subscription bases are also becoming international in scope. Thus, an obvious place to turn when looking at creating visibility is the international indexes and abstracting databases.

Indexing is a tool to bring the journal to the attention of all users of an index. Indexing helps to create greater awareness of a journal, and helps readers to locate articles they may not otherwise have found. In addition, the aggregation effect of an index creates both greater visibility for the whole group of journals indexed, and can confer greater respectability on the journals, as they are showcased alongside other publications. Almost all of the main international indexes mention visibility as part of the benefits of being listed with them. Even a non-traditional index, such as African Journals OnLine, notes that, “The objective of AJOL is to provide a window to the research published within the continent, and give greater

visibility to the participating journals, and to the research they convey” (www.ajol.info).

It is important, when considering submitting a journal for indexing, to consider what your objectives are in getting that journal indexed. If visibility is one of your aims, you should first look at defining what you mean by visibility – greater reader awareness, greater library awareness (leading to increased subscriptions), greater author awareness (leading to increased submissions of manuscripts from more parts of the world), or something else – and then consider whether indexing is the best means of achieving this. Being added to an index may well help in improving your overall visibility, but it is probably not going to result in a rush of new subscription orders, for instance. Indexing is often a complementary strategy, working together with a whole host of other strategies, to create the greatest effect for your journal.

At *Africa Insight*, and I am sure at many other journals, it is important for us to showcase research on Africa that is carried out by Africans or that is based on actual experience on the continent. Thus, a key aim for us in having the journal indexed is to create visibility for this often hidden side of scholarship on Africa. We have found, for this aim, that it is not so much the indexes and abstracting services we are listed in that have helped us to achieve this objective, but rather other kinds of aggregators, such as INASP’s African Journals OnLine (www.ajol.info).

In terms of general visibility – simply creating greater awareness – the major (very broad and comprehensive) indexes and the appropriate subject-specific indexes are most useful. For a start, almost all research libraries have access to Ulrich’s Periodicals Directory or HW Wilson (or both), as well as the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) and the International Bibliography of Social Sciences (IBSS). Then, depending on the fields covered by the library, they would go into the more subject-specific databases. Our journal is listed on Ulrich’s and IBSS, as well as indexes such as CAB Abstracts, AfricaBib, African Studies Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, Social Services Abstracts, Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, and Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts, and a few foreign-language or less formal indexes. We were listed on some of these simply by sending in a sample copy of the journal, on others by invitation (usually after a researcher has recommended your title to that index), and on still others through personal contacts. I suspect this is the usual mix for most journals.

For a journal starting out in indexing, how do you identify whether your journal is indexed in all the right places? The first place to look is at your

competitors. If they are covered in an index, then you should also be. This is a key aspect of visibility – you should be visible not only to potential readers, authors, and subscribers, but also to your competitors. Secondly, ask your collaborators. Journals that you work with can be an invaluable source of support and information – as this forum shows. If they have managed to get themselves listed on an index that you would like to be listed on, then ask for their experience of getting listed – as well as whether they feel any real benefits have accrued as a result of their inclusion on that index.

One note on journal formats: many databases index both print and online journals. But there are concerns about the long-term archiving of online journals, and we should bear this in mind when considering our own electronic journal strategies.

Of course, in terms of pure visibility, some might say that an indexing service is not strictly necessary in the online environment; as long as you are linked to the major search engines – and especially Google – then students and fellow researchers will be able to find your journal. If it isn't in Google, it (probably) doesn't exist! Apart from the difficulties of refining an Internet browser search to include only relevant items, there is a clear flaw in this line of thinking, and that relates to the other point about indexes that I would like to stress: Google does not provide any indication as to quality or credibility, and it certainly does not provide prestige. Only certain indexes can provide such assurance, the 'stamp of approval', if you like, or Kling and McKim's (1999) second criterion of 'trustworthiness'.

Credibility and prestige

Indexing is also significant, then, for constructing a reference system that gives our scholarship recognition and respect. As in the case of visibility, though, don't over-estimate the importance of indexing in this regard: journals and other scholarly publications are usually evaluated in terms of a number of attributes, including:

- * the use of peer review;
- * the names on the international editorial board;
- * circulation figures, and especially if circulation is international rather than local;
- * the author base, and the origins of the authors;

* citations or impact factor (which is often linked to indexing, but which I will not be discussing in this paper).

Being indexed is important for a journal, because it is considered a ‘measure of quality if a respected index includes a title’ (INASP 2004: 2). For example, many libraries use the ISI citation ranking or impact factor to influence their decision of whether to subscribe to a journal or not. ISI claims to cover all of ‘the world’s most important and influential journals’ (Testa 2002: 1): ‘Many factors are taken into account when evaluating journals for coverage, ranging from the qualitative to the quantitative. The journal’s basic publishing standards, its editorial content, the international diversity of its authorship, and the citation data associated with it are all considered’ (Ibid.).

But not all indexes are equal in this regard: some give you more visibility than prestige, and some may claim to cover only quality journals, but require little in the way of adherence to actual quality guidelines.

Measuring quality

The perception is that inclusion in a respected index confers a degree of respectability on a journal, and affects to some extent its ‘reputation’. But do the technical criteria used to select journals for indexes actually provide a measure of quality? The answer is both yes and no, depending on the index.

For most medical indexes, in particular, quality appears to be the key criterion. This is particularly true for indexes in the medical field: ‘Scientific merit of a journal’s content is the primary consideration in selecting journals for indexing. The validity, importance, originality, and contribution to the coverage of the field of the overall contents of each title are the key factors considered in recommending a title for indexing, whatever the intended purpose of the audience’ (Index Medicus, n.d.).

However, this is not the case for all indexes. The most important criterion for selection of a journal for possibly the most respected index, ISI, is in fact not quality, but rather regularity and timeliness of production. If a journal falls behind in its publication schedule, it cannot be listed on ISI – no matter how good it is. The rationale for this is apparently linked to whether a journal is a going concern: ‘The ability to publish on time implies a healthy backlog of manuscripts essential for ongoing viability’ (Testa 2002: 1). This may indirectly imply that a journal is of high quality, as many submissions are received – Adomi and Mordi (2003: 262). certainly make this case when they argue that ‘For a journal to attract the attention of an abstracting and indexing agency, one criterion is regular publication for a

reasonable period of time. During that period, the journal should have acquired a strong editorial board and focus in its area of learning. It follows, therefore, that with a well-established position, such journals are likely to be able to be selective’.

But a backlog of accepted manuscripts could also indicate that people find it easy to get published in that journal, and thus send in many submissions. Or perhaps it could be traced to the fact that the journal receives a subsidy, and thus is not beset by the financial woes which affect many of our journals in Africa, and often have a detrimental effect on publishing schedules. In turn, irregular production does not necessarily reflect on the quality of the journal. Thus, the primary criterion for listing on the ISI does not, in fact, measure quality, although the list and the citation index associated with it do confer credibility.

Apparently more closely related to quality are the criteria of relevance and representivity. If a journal is highly relevant in its field, that likely means it is read by most of the top researchers in that field, and probably publishes the high-profile researchers too. Again, this is not an unproblematic criterion for measuring quality, as not all relevant journals will adhere to strict peer review guidelines – indeed, many news magazines may publish highly relevant information and analysis, without being academically rigorous. At the same time, many journals not listed on indexes may be more relevant for disseminating specific research findings than other journals may be. So, relevance is also a somewhat contested criterion.

Because of the criterion of representivity (on IBSS, this is seen as very important aim, to provide an international perspective on the social sciences), the institutional location of a journal could be seen as a strength. If there is international interest in Africa, then journals based in Africa should stand to benefit.

And several indexes simply indicate whether a journal is peer-reviewed or not – and they take the journal’s word for it in this regard! But it could be argued that we always take the journal’s word for it. Ulrich’s Periodicals Directory and HW Wilson, for instance, are important indexes from the point of view of visibility – and every journal should try to be listed on both of them – but don’t be fooled into thinking that they have done any quality checks on the journals they cover. They aim for “accurate and comprehensive serials information” (www.ulrichsweb.com), rather than for a quality control service. A caveat to have in mind when considering this is that almost all indexes are collated and sold for profit – in other words, they are commercial entities rather than benevolent research supports.

Prestige and the South African System

In South Africa, being listed on an index may be about more than just an abstract notion of prestige – it is very closely related to whether one's journal is accredited or not. If accredited, then authors based at South African higher education institutions receive a substantial subsidy from the Department of Education for publishing in that journal. This is fairly high stakes!

The current system of accrediting journals has just been overhauled in South Africa, and – somewhat confusingly – three lists are now being used to determine accreditation. These are: all journals indexed on ISI, all journals indexed on IBSS, and a special list of other journals that have met certain criteria for accreditation but are not indexed on either of these databases. (IBSS is included because of concerns over a perceived bias towards the natural and hard sciences in ISI.)

If one of your aims for your journal is to expand your readership or author base in South Africa, then, it is a good idea to have your journal listed on either ISI or IBSS, so that your journal receives 'automatic' accreditation. Otherwise, you may have to follow a fairly lengthy process in having your journal accredited.

Bias and African journals

The biggest indexes are regularly accused of bias in their treatment of African journals, for several reasons: their use of standard criteria for journal selection, their emphasis on regularity of production, their English-language bias, and so on.

Eugene Garfield (1997), the founder of the ISI, suggests the following reasons for exclusion of journals from 'Third World' countries from the ISI database:

Many Third World countries suffer by publishing dozens of marginal journals whose reason for being is questionable. I have urged them to combine the best material into larger regional journals to achieve a critical mass. In addition, their local funding sources need to adopt stringent criteria for publication including international peer review.

In other words, journals from 'Third World' countries are not being included because they are of poor quality, include papers of only limited or regional interest, and do not subject their submissions to peer review. Clearly, this is a generalisation, as many developing countries, including African countries, produce very high quality journals. But this is the kind of thinking that may well be encountered when submitting a journal to an international index such as the ISI.

It should be remembered, in this regard, that most indexes were developed for Western audiences, and aim to serve their needs. They also serve to evaluate the journals they cover in terms of a 'universal' standard, which they have themselves developed, and which is applied across the board to all journals, regardless of origin. In other words, they will evaluate our journals as international journals, not as African journals, and certainly not as special cases requiring special criteria – unless they have a specific quota to fill in terms of international journal coverage, but this is the exception. This does not imply, however, that these indexes are biased against African journals, *per se*, and problems with indexes are often experienced by journals in other developing countries, and even some in the developed world.

If one is looking for information specifically relating to Africa, then there may well be a case to argue that the largest indexes do not sufficiently cover our continent. Only very few services, such as African Journals OnLine and African Studies Abstracts, specifically attempt to cover as many journals from and about Africa as possible, valuing relevance above conformity to a few set criteria. The AfricaBib index also deserves a special mention in this regard, as it was explicitly started to 'fill the gap' as 'few Africana journals were indexed in major indexing tools' (www.africabib.org). This index, which is freely available online, is making an attempt to index all relevant journals on African issues. It should be noted that these are not commercial indexes.

Another, and probably related, issue is that the emphasis on publishing in journals listed on databases such as ISI can become detrimental to the indigenous publishing industry in many African countries. South Africa is an exception because it has specifically tried to counter this by introducing a list of journals that meet strict quality criteria, but are not listed on ISI or IBSS for one or another reason. But most African countries confer more 'points' on their researchers for publishing in established international journals than in their own, local journals. This creates a hierarchy of value, and leads to a perception of lower value of the local journals, even if objectively this is not the case. And those who continue to support the local publishing industry by publishing in such journals lose out both in terms of the assessment of their publishing histories, and in terms of visibility in the international research community. Francis Nyamnjoh (2004: 3) calls this a 'critical choice between sacrificing relevance for recognition or recognition for relevance'. We thus need to look at ways to valorise our own journals, and also to make them visible.

One issue that may affect many African journals (as well as many other journals the world over) is the bias towards English-language journals – especially with international indexes such as ISI. The ISI guidelines state that, ‘Although important scientific information is published in all languages, authors must provide English translations of article titles, author keywords, and abstracts if they hope to reach the widest possible audience’ (Testa 2002: 1). IBSS provides English Language abstracts for all titles, but notes that up to 30% of the material covered is not in English – a fairly high percentage, by indexing standards (http://www.bids.ac.uk/info/ibss_service_guide.htm). Garfield (1997) notes, perhaps somewhat arrogantly, that ‘Any journal which claims international significance will at minimum include English titles and abstracts’.

For the Anglophone African countries, this should not represent much of a problem. For other countries, I would suggest collaboration – working together with colleagues in other countries to provide English-language abstracts, and in turn they could provide foreign-language abstracts, such as French ones. This would improve visibility for both your work and theirs, and encourage the cross-pollination of research conducted in different languages in Africa – research that is often cordoned off into its own areas because of difficulties with translation and understanding.

Conclusion

This paper has raised just a few of the issues around visibility (publicity) and credibility (trustworthiness) as these relate to indexes, based on my own experience.

In a changing and increasingly globally interconnected academic world, and amidst a glut of journals on the market, we need to find ways to make ours stand out. One tool amongst several is having our journals listed in indexing services. Indexes could be seen as a means of valorising what we do, because they provide us with visibility and in some cases credibility. But they do not valorise our work as African scholarship – for that, we either need to support initiatives such as African Journals OnLine, or we need to start our own indexing services to rival those of the West. At the same time, we need to measure our work against the best in the world, without shutting ourselves off into a small enclave.

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