

Online Journals: the Path Towards Visibility and Quality

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Abstract

Increasing the visibility of a journal is the key to increasing quality. The International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications works with journal editors in the global South to publish their journals online and to increase the efficiency of the peer review process. Editors are trained in using the Open Journals System software and in online journal management and strategy so they have the tools and knowledge needed to initiate a 'virtuous cycle' in which visibility leads to an increase in the number and quality of submissions and in turn, increased citations and impact. In order to maximise this increase in quality, it must be supported by strong editorial office processes and management. This article describes some of the issues and strategies faced by the editors INASP works with, placing a particular emphasis on Nepal Journals Online.

Key words: INASP, Open Journals System, Journals Online Projects, Nepal Journals Online, journal visibility, peer review

1. The Challenges

At a recent regional editorial workshop in Africa, INASP trained a group of journal editors, the majority of whom came

from one small institution (serving less than 2,000 students). Surprisingly, most of the editors based at that institution were not aware of the journals published by their colleagues. It may appear incredible, but this certainly is not an African or institutional phenomenon. Much valuable research lies hidden in journals which are only available on the shelves of one institutional department and circulated to a few interested academics.

According to Johnson and Luther (2007), approximately 40% of peer-reviewed journals are print-only. Without the visibility the internet brings, many of these print-only journals would remain undiscovered by a wider audience.

However, going online can be a challenge for many editors who are either not IT literate or are unsure of which journal hosting platforms to use. INASP works with the Public Knowledge Project (PKP) <http://pkp.sfu.ca/> which produces low-cost open source software, to provide low-cost multiple journal hosting solutions. One such platform is NepJOL www.nepjol.info which at the time of writing hosted 26 journals from all over Nepal across a broad range of subjects.

In addition to providing a platform for hosting the journals, training is also needed to provide the editors and editorial staff with the skills needed for loading their own content and for using the full online submission system. With new systems come new procedures, so training also needs to be given on best practice in managing an editorial office. To meet this need, INASP runs a series of workshops addressing these training needs.

2. Improving quality

Quality is just as important as visibility when attracting readers and authors to a journal. Authors need to be assured

that the journal has a good reputation, a respectable editorial board, a peer review process and that their paper will be processed professionally and quickly. The increased visibility which going online brings to a journal starts ‘a virtuous cycle’ of increased submissions which means editors can choose better papers, which leads to a better quality journal with more citations, which again increases visibility and attracts more submissions, allowing the cycle to perpetuate.

Increased visibility and quality also lead to increased subscriptions, therefore also ensuring a journal’s financial stability.

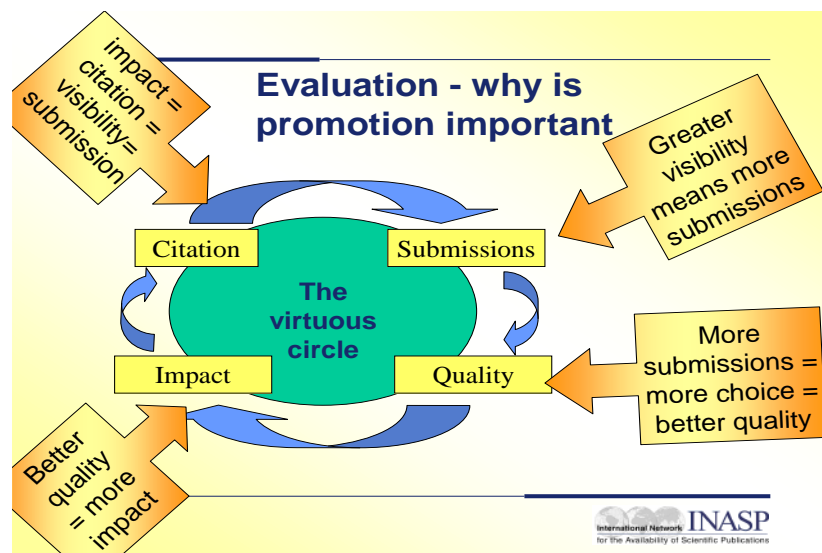


Figure 1: The Virtuous Cycle

Being indexed in the right places also contributes to the virtuous cycle, as indexing brings both visibility and in some cases, a stamp of quality to a journal. Although most journal editors strive to get their journals indexed in well-established and prestigious indexes such as Thomson ISI, there are other forms of indexing which can also greatly enhance visibility,

such as subject indexes or indexing in GoogleScholar <http://scholar.google.co.uk/>, which already covers NepJOL.

In April 2009, the JOL (Journals Online) editors were invited to complete a survey in order to assess the impact of joining the JOL programme. Survey participants were asked which indexes they were included in when they joined the JOL programme and which indexes they were included in at the time of the survey.

The results showed a 33% increase in inclusion in indexes for journals joining the JOL programme with a significant increase in the number of journals being indexed in the Directory of Open Access Journals.

3. The review process

A robust peer review process is essential to this process of increasing quality and the key to attracting good reviewers and authors is being aware of what their needs are, issuing clear instructions and providing incentives or rewards where appropriate.

For most reviewers, one of the key things which motivates them to review for a journal is often an altruistic sense of duty, but other great motivators are professional recognition and having their name associated with a respected journal. It is also a chance for them to update their own research knowledge and in some circumstances accrue points towards professional development and accreditation. Of course many reviewers are also editors, so conducting a review can be of mutual benefit if the journal they review for agrees to return the favour.

Anything which makes it easier for them to complete their review quickly and efficiently is also a large motivator,

which is why an online review system is so appealing to many reviewers. However, an online review system is only appropriate in circumstances where the reviewers have reliable, cheap internet access. At the time of writing there was compulsory load shedding of 51 hours a week in Nepal, making the use of an online review system completely unrealistic for the editors and reviewers for the journals on NepJOL. However, in countries where connectivity is good, the online review process has significantly streamlined the review process and in many cases has enabled the journal to expand its international editorial board and thus its pool of international reviewers.

Whether reviewing in an online environment or not, reviewers will be more inclined to continue reviewing for a journal if they are rewarded. Rewards need not cost a lot of money and may in many circumstances be free. For example, free subscriptions can be given to the journal (and life-long subscriptions for reviewers who complete more two or more reviews per year). Other incentives include:

- offering free offprints (for print journals)
- acknowledgement in journal
- free/reduced membership of association (if applicable)
- a place on the Editorial Board
- review certificates
- invitations to reviewer workshops

In a recent study undertaken by the Publishing Research Consortium, Ware (2008), 56% of reviewers surveyed said that a free subscription to a journal would make them more likely to review for a journal. 44% cited acknowledgment in the journal as an incentive and 43% cited payment in kind by the journal such as the waiver of colour or other publication charges, free offprints etc as most likely to encourage them to review for a journal.

When using an online submission system such as NepJOL for the whole review process, another incentive is training in using the system. Well trained reviewers will be more likely to use the system and once the system is in use, this will then lead to shorter review times and eventually, shorter publication times.

4. Training

Training is essential not only for the reviewers, but also for the editors and authors using the system. There are some excellent training videos for the Open Journals System used by NepJOL available from the Public Knowledge Project website at: <http://pkp.sfu.ca/tutorials>

INASP ran three initial training workshops for editors in Nepal in loading content on to the NepJOL website, online journal strategy and in using the full online submission system. Two subsequent training workshops were held in Pokhara and Baglung. Those who were trained at these workshops should now be able to carry out some informal training of their peers and the reviewers for their journals.

5. Streamlining editorial office processes

‘As previously discussed, for many journals, especially in settings where resources and connectivity are limited, using the full online submission system is not practical.’ For those journals wishing to speed up publication times in order to attract better quality submission times, the editorial office processes need to be streamlined. In order to monitor and improve standards, systems should be used to assess the total number of manuscripts submitted, the acceptance rate and the average turn-around time for all manuscripts.

If a journal is falling behind schedule, authors will face delays in disseminating their work and their research may lose its impact. Subscribers and readers will claim for missing issues or make complaints about the publication schedule and answering these will use up valuable time and resources. Crucially, if a journal is behind schedule, indexers will start to question how current the journal material is and may stop including it in their index, which will in turn lead to fewer submissions and subscriptions.

The Open Journals System used by NepJOL keeps a record of manuscripts submitted, acceptance rates and average turn-around times and reports can be produced from the system for monitoring purposes. If a journal has good turn around times, these times can be promoted widely as they are likely to attract new authors. However, for journals which are not yet online or for which an online system is not appropriate, simple spreadsheets can be set up to monitor these things.

One of the main obstacles to publishing a journal on schedule is delays with the review process. Some ways to address this issue are:

- Sending out reminder letters at regular intervals. The OJS system has this built in.
- Making sure any deadlines are realistic and if not, reviewing them (Also, making sure the reviewers are aware of the deadlines)
- Providing an incentive to reviewers e.g. printing the reviewer's name in the journal at the end of the year

However, frequently it is the authors themselves who cause the delays by not returning the proofs of their papers quickly enough. In order to avoid this, editors can set deadlines and send out reminders. A 48 hour turn around is standard for proofs sent electronically, though in areas where proofs need to be mailed, time needs to be built in for postal delays.

However, it is often not the postal system which causes the delays, but administrative errors, such as a wrong address, so it is important for Editors and Editorial Managers to follow-up on any unreturned proofs with a phone call to ensure that they reached their destination.

6. Managing copyflow

If a journal has not been able to publish on schedule it can create a back-log situation, which can be very frustrating for authors whose articles have been accepted and are waiting to be published. To clear the backlog, publishing a double issue can sometimes be a temporary solution until strong editorial processes are put in place. Editors should also consider reviewing the selection process if too many articles are being accepted.

However, frequently the situation is quite the opposite and there are not enough manuscripts or not enough manuscripts of sufficient quality. In order to address this problem, editors should consider posting a call for papers in the journal and to relevant lists, discussion forums, blogs and other media sources. They should also consider approaching relevant conference organisers to publish the conference papers as a special issue. Finally, 'filler' material such as longer editorials, conference announcements and invited review papers can be used although this tactic should be used cautiously as it will have an impact on the quality of the journal.

Once these key issues have been addressed and the journal is on schedule again, editors should see a steady increase in the number of submissions as authors begin to renew their confidence in the journal. One journal editor, Allan Bernado, Editor of the Asia-Pacific Researcher, experienced a huge increase in submissions when his journal joined Philippine

Journals Online. The increase was so marked that they are now considering increasing the number of issues they publish a year from two to three. Other journals such as the Journal of Scientific Research from Bangladesh, have seen a marked increase in the number of international authors submitting to their journals.

7. The Nepalese context

Unfortunately, until the load shedding problem alleviates and internet connectivity improves in Nepal, Nepalese journal editors will not be able to fully enjoy the benefits of an online journal system, but this time can be used to streamline processes, address editorial office issues and work on innovative ways to attract new reviewers and authors. Tribhuvan University staff in collaboration with INASP are working hard to upload back issues and ensure that the NepJOL site is kept as up-to-date as possible, despite these challenging circumstances.

8. Conclusion

Increasing the visibility of journal content is also the key to increasing the quality of a journal, but quality also depends on streamlined editorial office processes and efficient journal management, which is being made easier through access to training and open source online submission systems such as OJS. Through inclusion in the Journals Online Projects, journals from Nepal and other developing countries can become more visible and attract an international authorship and readership, despite major technological challenges and limited resources.

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