Is anyone out there listening?

A lot of work goes into publishing a scholarly journal. It starts with the laborious work of planning and conducting research and writing the final manuscript. Once the manuscript is submitted to a scholarly journal, the process of evaluating the scientific rigour and contribution to science will start. This involves administrative staff, editors and peer reviewers. Once accepted for publication, the process of editing, page layout and proofreading follows involving copy-editors and layout artists. Behind all this is the business of running the journal. It is like any other business involving strategy, planning, resources and working with other people to make the enterprise a success. It is hard work and it can be risky, particularly in times of economic recession when sponsors, advertisers and authors are cutting back expenses.

But then, after all the pressure, toil, managing difficult relations with authors and editors, and repetitive quality checking you may hold the copy in your hand and it suddenly *feels* worth all the effort. But then often the nagging question comes up: "*Will it make a difference*?" Is anybody out there actually *reading* this stuff?

Publishing in academic journals are regarded by many as the preferred way of introducing new research/knowledge to society at large, and particularly to the scholarly community. Scientists and scholars use such published new knowledge as the basis for their own further research. In this manner science and scholarship is advanced, one step at a time. Academic journals are peer reviewed, i.e. the content is scrutinised by other scholars in the same field and, as such, more credibility is attached to its content. Sadly, however, academic journals often fail in this crucial role. In a leader article entitled "'Truth' in medical journal publishing", the editor of the *South African Medical Journal*, Daniel Ncayiyana, suggested that readers of academic medical journals should be cautious, as he quoted many instances where medical journals were defrauded by authors, and where the peer-review process of journals failed to indentify bad or fraudulent research.[1] He also quoted a disturbing essay by Ioannidis, arguing that most published medical research is probably false due to poor study design and bias![2]

One way of looking at a journal's impact is readership. South African Family Practice (SAFP) is distributed in printed format to 6 000 generalist doctors in South Africa every second month. But how many recipients of the print journal actually read it, and do they read it cover to cover? Each month about 9 000 persons (each counted once) will also read SAFP online (at www.safpj.co.za), and the website will receive about 14 000 visits, and generate about 50 000 page impressions. These website statistics are more objective as they measure actual readership. But readership does not say anything about the scientific quality of the journal, and whether it is making a difference in the scientific field.

It is possible to measure the scientific "impact factor" (IF) of academic journals, The SCImago Journal and Country Rank[3] is a good example of how the scientific importance of a journal can be measured by, inter alia, counting how many times on average an article in a journal has been quoted in the same database (e.g. Scopus). SAFP is ranked no 36 (out of 69) in the South African list in the Scopus database, with an impact factor of 0,19 (average citations per article over a period of two years, 2009 IF referring to the years 2007 and 2008). The *South African Journal of Marine Science* topped the list with an IF of 1,20 citations per doc. Be that as it may, articles in SAFP had only 33 citations over a three year period in the Scopus database (comprising more than 17 000 titles). This is humbling food for thought. And yet the IF measure has been criticised heavily for its lack of scientific validity and accuracy, to the point that scientists are actively discouraged to use it.[4]

An improved measurement is the Scimago Journal Rank (SJR),[3] which takes into account the ranking of journals citing SAFP, and the Source Normalized Impact per Paper (SNIP),[5] measures contextual citation impact by weighting citations based on the total number of citations in a subject field. The impact of a single citation is given higher value in subject areas where citations are less likely, and vice versa. Google Scholar® also now gives a measure of how many times an article is cited by others, but the accuracy of this measure is unknown.

After all the measurement the question remains, "what is the real impact of the journal?" Perhaps we will only know the real value of SAFP the day we lose it. In the meantime SAFP is hopefully making a meaningful contribution to science worldwide and particularly in South Africa and Africa, but the editor will hopefully be forgiven for asking this question in the face of all the effort to give birth to a new issue every second month!

Pierre de Villiers
Editor-in-chief

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