

Not (Just) Another Journal

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Librarians and academics complain bitterly about the proliferation of new journals, particularly in the scientific and technical field. The number of new STM journals launched has gone up exponentially. From 1665 (when the first two scientific journals were published - *Le Journal des Savants* and the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*), the numbers rose to about 100 at the beginning of the 18th century, and in 1900 there were approximately 10,000. The British Library's *Current Serials Received* listed 45,000 journals in 1975, and 70,000 in 1986.

This growth far outstrips even the rate of increase in the publication of new books. Surprisingly few new journals fail, so the total journal population is growing all the time.

Two factors combine to foster this apparently logarithmic increase. One is the way in which new subject areas continually emerge: as our knowledge base increases, one speciality may, for instance, split into two; or an area of overlap between two subject areas may come to be regarded as a separate subject in its own right.

The second factor, and one which is not necessarily conducive to worthwhile publishing, is the pressure on academics, and on scientists in particular, to publish. It is essential to one's career prospects to be able to append a substantial list of publications to one's *curriculum vitae* - even if they are of little substance or originality.

These new journals place enormous pressure on libraries. Quite apart from the unanswerable question of how to spend the same amount of money (if not less) on a larger number of titles, there is the space problem. Unlike a new book, a new journal will continue to eat up more and more shelf space for the rest of its life. Archive copies can be stored on microfilm or, increasingly, on compact disk, but for day-to-day reference it is hard to see how the good old fashioned paper copies can be done away with.

Then consider the problems of the reader. In order to keep pace with the work going on in his field, he has to spend more and more of his time reading - rather than actually working. The sheer quantity of material being published in some fields makes it virtually impossible for an individual scientist to read everything which is relevant to his work; yet to choose, sight unseen - perhaps on the basis of an online bibliographic search - what is worth reading and what is not, is an invidious, not to say risky, process. How, then, can the scientific reader find his way through this ever-denser forest of publications? What is needed - to continue the analogy - is a map; something which systematically delineates the whole area, and then indicates in summary form what is to be found in each part of the map.

Such a map finds its equivalent in a review journal: a journal which gives the busy reader an overview of the subject, and summarises the most important work in each area.

In an area where a great deal is being published, it is all-important for the reader to be able to gain a balanced perspective of the whole field. In a review journal, the underlying structure of each issue can be carefully planned to give a representative balance.

In each article within the journal, the author will have summarised the most significant work in the field. The references will point the reader to the most important primary sources; when he looks up the originals, their own references will in turn lead further if required.

But does it work - or does it just clutter up the shelves still further? Publishers' experience shows that it does work. Elsevier, for example, have a highly successful series of *Trends in ...* newsletters, which are, in effect, informal review journals. Churchill Livingstone Medical Journals launched last year a more substantial review journal, *Current Orthopaedics*, and in the wake of its success they are about to launch several others.

All in all, it does seem that, far from compounding the problem of 'too many journals', review journals - at their various levels - can provide a way to help the overloaded reader to cope.

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