

Corruption of Journal Impact Factors

Scientists and academic institutions widely use Impact Factors (<http://wos.mimas.ac.uk/>) to evaluate the relative importance of journals. Although sometimes considered controversial, publishing in relatively high Impact Factor journals has been broadly applied as a stamp of approval for hiring and promotions, to rate the accomplishments of academic departments, and the importance of particular disciplines. Both authors and publishers strive to publish high impact journal articles, and the pressure to do so has apparently led to an insidious abuse in how some publishers correspond with authors of nearly accepted manuscripts. At or before the time of acceptance, several journals' editors are requesting that authors cite additional papers published in that same journal. Some of these requests are general such as 'We would also appreciate it if you would consider citing relevant past papers [from our journal] in your manuscript', whereas others are more specific, with journal editors indicating one to several recent (often unpublished) citations.

Although the extent of this practice is unknown, at least four major journals in the area of ecology and evolutionary biology routinely encourage such self citation. Because Impact Factors are calculated by

dividing the number of citations in the current year (e.g. in 2004) by the total number of articles published in the two previous years (i.e. in 2003 and 2002), citation of articles relatively hot off the press will increase the Impact Factor of a journal.

A gentle nudge by an editor to cite additional papers if relevant is all too easy to be uncritically accepted by most authors who are simply overjoyed with the news that their paper has been accepted. To maintain the integrity of objective scientific research, this questionable policy that essentially results in the 'businessification' of science must be stopped. Publishers should be embarrassed and authors should not comply.

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