Submitting to a journal commits you to it for six weeks to six months (or longer) – so choose your journal carefully

blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/11/10/choose-your-journal-carefully/

11/10/2016

*There is plenty to consider when making a decision about which journal to submit your paper to; ranging from basic questions over the journal's scope, through its review process and open access offerings, all the way to the likelihood your work will be widely read and cited. **Patrick Dunleavy** has compiled a comprehensive list of these considerations, complete with tips on what you should be looking out for.*

Wouldn't it be great if there was some well-grounded evidence of the best place to publish your research? After all, you've sweated for two or more years on collecting the data or source materials, thinking through the issues involved, resolving problems, and writing up the finished text. You're heavily invested in the work, and you want to get the best possible exposure for it in the optimal journal. So ask around in your department or lab and you'll quickly find out that there's a lot of folklore and anecdotes about where to go, but perhaps that different people give very different advice.

Often your department or lab may have a list of 'recommended journals', which may not be all that useful for various reasons. Often it is what was left over from some previous audit exercise—in the UK the REF 2014 and in Australia the ERA 2015 rounds. Often the list is where your local top professors publish their well-funded research (or perhaps where they used to publish in their glory days). But perhaps it hasn't been updated for a while and has some obvious glitches. It can also often be just a kind of 'idiot board' including any journal over a certain Journal Impact Factor level, even though this JIF indicator is completely discredited— e.g. it was outlawed from use in both the REF and ERA studies because of its gross limitation (see below for more). If you are a PhD student or an early career researcher, these lists are often just actively disabling—they may be out of your league for the kind of work that you have to publish and so just very depressing to read.
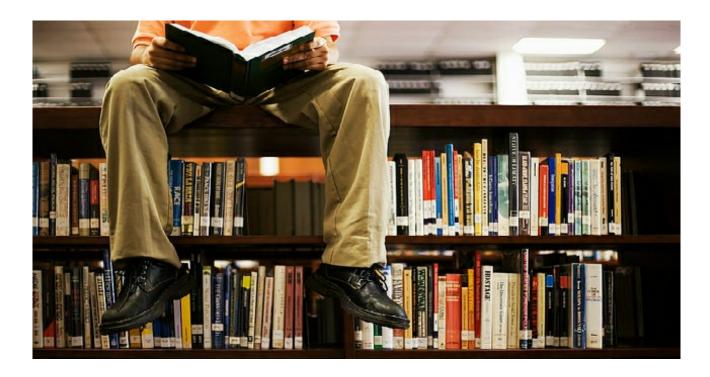
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In fact, when deciding which journal to send material to most senior staff consider a wide range of factors, not just the obvious things, because they can all in different ways have considerable effects upon impact. There is also now a great service available in Google Scholar Metrics which gives excellent quantitative information about every journal in the world (of any significance), for free from any PC, tablet or smartphone. Just type in the journal name to GSM's search box and get an instant reply, using two strong indicators discussed below. (Note: be careful to enter the *exact* journal name into GSM— e.g. if the journal uses '&' as part of its title and you enter 'and' instead, GSM will just show nothing as found).

Beyond that what more can we say? Well, there is an interesting and extremely expensive monograph published in 2012 by Stefanie Hauser called, *Multi-dimensional Journal Evaluation*. I have tried to extract from this (as best I can) the factors that seem to have proven relevance to the choices most researchers will be considering. I have combined information from the factors she tested for with a wide range of factors mentioned to research colleagues or me as relevant to a recent research project on The Impact of the Social Sciences, which also included some STEM academics (for some free-to-view materials on this please visit the web page).

So I hope that the factors set out below are relevant for a wide range of academic and scientific authors. I've grouped them into five categories—about the scope of a journal; its review processes; open or closed access; coverage, scale and style issues; and lastly, the journal's dissemination and impact.

I begin with some key aspects of the journal's mission:

A. Scope		
Criterion	Key question	Best answer
Age	When was the journal established and how long has it been going?	Long-established journals always sell more copies and so are available in and via more university libraries than more recent ones that are yet to build up a readership. Subscription journals established in the last five years may have very small distribution bases.
Publication history	How consistently and regularly has the journal been published?	Avoid journals that do not stick strictly to announced publication schedules, or include 'light content' issues. These may be having difficulty attracting appropriate content.
Publisher affiliation	Who publishes the journal?	Journals published by a professional body are normally the most prestigious. They are followed by well-known commercially-run journals from top firms and with well-known editors. Commercial journals from obscure or new publishers are normally last.
Scope	Is the journal a general ('omnibus') one for a discipline? Or is its coverage specific to only one sub-field, and how large is it?	In STEM subjects there are a few trans-disciplinary, prestige journals such as *Nature* or *Science*. New open access entrant PLOS ONE can be added to that list. Normally, however, generalist journals for a single discipline have the largest readership and most prestige. They are followed by top sub-discipline journals. Specialized field and hyper-specialized journals come lower down – because their potential readership is less.
Size	How many copies does the journal sell? How many university libraries around the world is it available in?	There are about 2,500 top university libraries worldwide, so anything over this number is very good. Publishers create package deals which bundle up large numbers of journals for university libraries so establishing firm subscriber numbers is often tricky. But basically the wider a journal's global library access, the better the chance that a relevant researcher will find your work and cite it.
Audience	Does the journal reach an additional practitioner audience over and above academics (i.e. professionals in a given sector)?	Some long-established, prestigious journals, produced by associations and with wide circulation are also read by professionals outside academia for historical and institutional reasons. They can be important places to publish applied work. Rather differently, some short article journals especially have a general (lay) readership, and can be important for publicizing public engagement work.
Composition of the Editorial Board	Who is on the editorial board? How well-known, well-respected and research-forefront are they?	All editorial boards are a bit fossilized. Famous names with great reputations are best. But not those resting on their laurels: most should still actively publish, and at least a quarter should be current path-breakers or exemplars.
Internationality	How international is the journal (e.g. as reflected in the editorial board and authorship)?	Multi-country journals are best or those that reach into a particular region (e.g. Europe).

The second dimension concerns how the journal goes about reviewing your work:

B. Review Process		
Criterion	*Key question*	*Best answer*
Model of peer review	Does the journal use single/double/triple-blind review? Or open review?	Peer review is triple-blind if the handling editor and 2+ reviewers don't know your identity and the reviews are anonymous. With double-blind the editor knows who you are. With single-blind the reviewers know as well. With open, you also know who the reviewers are. In practice, unless you're a hermit, everyone knows who you are from Googling a few distinctive words from the text. A few double-blind journals may make reviewers pledge not to do this. Open is best for authors since it implies a greater degree of reviewer accountability and honesty.
Post-publication peer review	Does the journal use a newer, post-publication peer review model?	This approach is used in PLOS ONE and is becoming more accepted. These reviews may garner more comments (and therefore criticisms) but from a wide pool of researchers. They may bring different perspectives on your work, but it'd better be right!
Time from submission to decision	How long does it take from your paper first reaching the journal to the editor sending you a decision letter?	The shorter the better. A long delay in reviewing and decision-making generally indicates a slackly-run journal or one for which securing reviewers is especially difficult. This may be because either the content is very technical or the journal has a weak reputation among expert reviewers. A long delay in the process may also indicate a journal that requires large-scale or unsupported 'revise and resubmit' conditions.
ePublication delay	How long does it take from final acceptance to the article being published online?	As short as possible is best. Time here shows how well-organized the production process is. Some journals may be over-accepting papers and accumulating large backlogs - perhaps because quality standards are slipping? On the other hand, an unusually short timeline here may indicate a dearth of other quality submissions.
ePublication approach	Does the journal use 'continuous online' publication, or wait to group articles into issues? Or is it digital only?	Continuous online is far better as your work reaches its potential audience faster. But the journal needs to be organized to alert potential readers to online-only articles. Print issues count for little in the digital era, but in humanities and some social sciences some old-fashioned readers and citers often still wait for issues, pages, etc. Being able to afford the sheer waste of time and resources on print also still confers prestige in some corners.
Print publication delay	How long does it take from online publication to an article being included in a print issue?	As short as possible although with recognition that desirable journals will have longer timings due to large numbers of excellent papers. Some journals now have ludicrous gaps of two years from online to print issues. A long backlog here may also indicate over-acceptance by the editors.
Rejection rate	What is the rejection rate as a percentage of all papers submitted?	There's an inverted U relationship here - medium rejection rates are best for authors. High rejection rates imply a strong chance of wasting time and effort. Low rejection rates imply that the journal is desperate or unknown, and so will accept weak stuff (and is known to do so).
Correction and retraction history	What is the correction rate compared to other similar journals? Have articles been retracted?	Activity here should be as little as possible. Relatively frequent corrections or errata being published may suggest sloppy editorial practices. Retractions of papers may suggest ineffective gatekeeping against fraud and malpractice by the journal's reviewers and editors. Empirically, top journals have the worst retraction histories.

A third key dimension concerns open access (still rare and often expensive) or closed access publishing:

C. Open or Closed Access		
Criterion	*Key question*	*Best answer*
Open or closed access	Does the journal offer open access or is it only closed access?	There is a key balance to be struck between publishing in an open access journal and publishing in a high-prestige journal. These are seen to be incompatible but that view is increasingly being challenged. Generally the more open access content a journal includes, the wider the readership is likely to be. This is also important in the UK where HEFCE's open access policy for the next REF mandates that publications be open access in order to be submitted. There are strong pushes from disciplinary structures to maintain journal hierarchies.
Gold or Green open access	If the journal is open access, is it via Article Processing Charges (APCs) or by allowing placement in a repository?	If the journal is open access through payment of an APC, how much is this and can costs be covered by departmental or research grant sources? Or if the journal facilitates open access via placement in a repository, what is the embargo period? These are often much longer for the humanities and social sciences; sometimes up to two years.

The fourth dimension involves the fit between your work and some more specific aspects to consider in submitting:

D. Coverage, Scale and Style		
Criterion	*Key question*	*Best answer*
Number of issues	How many issues does the journal publish per year?	Regular publication is best as it builds a dedicated readership.
Article length limit	How long are articles allowed to be? Is more than one type of article published?	Article lengths can vary from research notes at 2,000 words to full articles at 9,000 words. You want to be able to choose a length that best suits your research, but remember: less can be more.
Other article titles	Do existing papers have titles that show affinities with your planned paper?	Yes, the journal has covered similar territory to your paper, but not so much so that it might now be rejecting submissions on exactly those lines.
References style	How 'standard issue' is the referencing style used by the journal?	It's best if the journal uses a well-known and clear style. Use a reference manager like Mendeley or EndNote to get your submission into the same basic approach as the journal. Be ready for the many thousands of bonkers conventions adhered to by different journals, though.
Publishing language	What language does the journal publish in?	English still gives the widest opportunities for international circulation and inclusion in legacy bibliometric databases.
Authors	How well-known are the existing authors?	Look for authors with high Google Scholar citation scores.
Institutions	What universities or institutions do existing authors come from?	Ideally, these should be diverse, high-prestige centres in your discipline, from multiple countries (including yours).

The final set of factors to consider is what happens if a journal accepts your article. How likely is it that publishing there will reach a wide readership and begin to generate citations to your work?

E: Dissemination and Impact		
Criterion	Key question	Best answer
H-index	What is the journal's h-index?	This is most conveniently operationalised by the h5-index used in Google Scholar Metrics (GSM). The h-index of a publication is the largest number h such that at least h articles in that publication were cited at least h times each. For example, a score of 35 shows that at least 35 of the journal's articles have been cited at least 35 times in the last five full years.
H5-median	What is the journal's h5-median score?	The h5-median is a measure of the distribution of citations to the articles over the last five full years. If it is high, then the journal has a peak of high-scoring papers; if lower, it has a tail of low-scoring papers.
Use of Journal Impact Factor (JIF)	Does the journal make a big thing of its JIF?	The Journal Impact Factor is a completely meaningless average cites score in old 'legacy' databases for all the articles published in the last two or five years. It is far worse than the h5 median score above. A journal making a big thing of it is run by out-of-touch folk. As Stephen Curry wrote: "If you publish a journal that trumpets its impact factor in adverts or emails, you are statistically illiterate. If you [proclaim] that impact factor to three decimal places, there is little hope for you."
Download data	Does the journal provide download data on online articles?	Download data is useful to show how large an audience each article is receiving. Consistently high scores show a strong and engaged online readership.
Altmetric scores	Does the journal use altmetrics to show the social media reach of articles or the journal as a whole?	Altmetrics show social media metrics for articles, e.g. how many people have shared links to them on Facebook, via blogs or on Twitter. A journal that has a strong social media presence will help your article be more visible as a first step to securing citations.
Linking to other outputs	Does the journal allow other outputs or subsequent work to be linked to the original article?	It is increasingly the case that datasets and other relevant outputs are being published alongside articles. Readers are then able to see the full set of outputs from research and make use of them.

To read Stephen Curry's comprehensive and entertaining critique of JIF, quoted above, please visit his personal website.

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About the author

Patrick Dunleavy is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he has worked since 1979. He has authored and edited numerous books on political science theory, British politics and urban politics, as well as more than 50 articles in professional journals. He is Chair of the Public Policy Group.