

Impact Factor and the Journal of Voice

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In late June of 2018, Clarivate Analytics, formerly Thomson Reuters, notified us that they had decided to “suppress” the Journal of Voice (JOV) from the 2017 Journal Citation Reports (JCR), hence disqualifying the journal from having its 2017 Journal Impact Factor (JIF) (<https://clarivate.com/essays/impact-factor/>) calculated and published as usual. Clarivate claimed they had calculated Journal of Voice’s journal-level self-citations made in the 2017 JIF calculation window at 47%, which apparently resulted in a “distortion” of its ranking in the Otorhinolaryngology journal category. There were no discussions with or notification of the journal editorial or publisher before this action was taken.

Upon hearing the news of the suppression we were shocked, but we were confident that we could appeal the decision successfully by pointing to the simple and unintended reason for the 47% self-citation rate: an increase in the number of articles published in the journal in 2017 (more on this below). The formula used by Clarivate results in an increased percentage score when the number of papers published in the journal increases, even though the percentage of self-citations per paper is unchanged from the acceptable percentage that occurred in previous years. To our surprise, Clarivate failed to take this into consideration even after correspondence on the matter. Given the many decades of collective experience in the field of journal citation indexing that they possess, we expected Clarivate’s staff to understand that a simple calculation such as JIF can be heavily influenced by otherwise unremarkable changes in research areas that are very small and very “niche” but are nonetheless growing (or declining), by contrast with large research areas with numerous different venues in which to publish and cite.

The increase in self-citations in the 2017 JIF window is a simple side-effect of the increase in the number of papers published in 2017, rather than any other changes in citation patterns in the journal. As our readers—researchers and practitioners know, there are only two major journals dedicated exclusively to the laryngology and related disciplines, the Journal of Voice and *Folia Phoniatica*; and only JOV is dedicated exclusively to voice. Nearly all of the elite literature is published in one of these two specialty journals. In accordance with Bradford’s law of scattering, a rapidly-diminishing tail of relevant articles appear in general otolaryngology journals. Given the concentration of publications in this field in the Journal of Voice, journal-level self-citation is appropriate and unavoidable. Consequently, the Journal

cannot be judged on this dimension in the same way that one would judge the more than 30 general otolaryngology journals. It is also notable that the percentage of citations to JOV in some of the excellent articles published in premier general otolaryngology journals such as *Laryngoscope* was similar to the percentage cited in JOV.

After receiving the initial notice of suppression, our publisher performed an analysis of the citation data from Clarivate’s own citation index. This showed that the main driver for the 2017 JIF’s higher-than-usual self-citation rate is a 67% increase in papers published in Journal of Voice in 2017 (336) compared to 2016 (201), leading to a large influx of additional self-citations to articles previously published in the journal, including, but not limited to, the years that count for the JIF itself. There is no evidence whatever of malicious intent (because there was none), but instead we are being penalized for a side-effect of an editorial decision to expand the volume of material published in the journal. Despite presenting this and related evidence in full to Clarivate, they never reconsidered their opinion that the journal’s 2017 JIF was both distorted and distorting.

We find it appalling that—as is apparently the usual case in such “suppressions” - there was no consultation with the editorial board or the publisher of Journal of Voice before Clarivate made their decision, and no opportunity for discussion or rebuttal. Moreover, there was no opportunity to confirm or refute their calculation of self-citation data. Since Clarivate did not assign JIF, the underlying data used in their calculations are not available; and Clarivate has not shared them. We have checked available data through the Web of Science database, and they show a 36% self-citation rate (rather than the 47% rate claimed by Clarivate). Thirty-six percent is approximately our usual self-citation rate and has always been considered acceptable. The reason for the disparity (and possible error on Clarivate’s part) is unclear since they have not made their data available to us. Clarivate denies that suppression suggests misconduct: if so, why suppress at all? In a post at the excellent Scholarly Kitchen blog in October 2018,¹ Phil Davis notes that: “*Clarivate relies upon several criteria when determining when titles should be suppressed and ‘does not assume motive on behalf of any party.’ To Clarivate, this is purely an exercise in measurement. Nevertheless, the very methods for defining citation distortion makes the JCR highly sensitive to tiny aberrations when they affect specialist journals in small fields and largely insensitive to big distortions when they affect large, highly cited journals. It may be time to review Clarivate’s grounds for suppression and decide whether its scales require rebalancing.*”¹ Our own experience seems to bear out the need for such a review. A simple solution might be to merely display journal-level self-citation rates more prominently in the rankings and allow users of the JIF to decide what they feel is a fair and appropriate level.

Journal of Voice is now suppressed for a full year, and pending re-evaluation by Clarivate should be reinstated to the JCR with

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a 2018 JIF. In the meantime, the damage is done: this is having a substantial impact on the journal and our research community as a whole. Clarivate's action casts aspersions on our journal, our editorial board, our publisher, and on me as editor. While they might be following their mathematical formula, their action is neither appropriate nor consistent with the purpose for which this metric was devised.

Considering Clarivate's lack of understanding of small research areas, there remains the question of what a journal editor could do to avoid this scenario in the future. Should the journal restrict its rate of growth each year, thereby curbing rapid changes in journal-level self-citations? As a researcher and practitioner

passionate about our field and proud of the increasingly high quality of the research being submitted to Journal of Voice, I would find this egregious as it would stifle the growth of the field. Perhaps we and other journals should be depending upon different metrics and be less concerned about JIF.

REFERENCE

1. Davis P. Tipping the scales: is impact factor suppression biased against small fields? The Scholarly Kitchen. Available at: <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/10/08/tipping-the-scales-is-impact-factor-suppression-biased-against-small-fields/>. Accessed November 13, 2018. October 8, 2018.