FROM THE EDITOR

A Fall From Grace?

Anne Katz, PhD, RN, FAAN, and Leslie McGee, MA

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I remember those halcyon days so well. I was the newly appointed editor of this esteemed journal, and the *Oncology Nursing Forum* (*ONF*) sat atop the impact factor list of nursing and allied health journals. As a reminder, the impact factor is a measure of the frequency with which the average article has been cited within a particular year. The latest impact factor from 2017 uses citation data from articles published from 2015–2016. To be clear, this is not a measure or commentary of an article's quality, but rather a journal's citation popularity among authors.

In the 2012 release of rankings, based on the 2010–2011 listings, *ONF* was No. 1, and I ordered buttons for the publication staff and editorial board members that stated "We're #1!" Perhaps I gloated just a bit, but I was proud of the recognition and the hard work of our authors, reviewers, and publication staff. The following year, we were No. 2 in the rankings. Although I was a little disappointed, at least there was not another oncology nursing journal anywhere near us in the rankings.

It went back and forth like that for the next few years. Each June, I would get a little thrill of anticipation as I waited for notification from Mark Vrabel, MLS, AHIP, ELS, the information resources supervisor at the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS). Where would we be this year? It was all good news until the 2016 impact factors were released in July 2017. We went from No. 2 in 2015 to No. 22 in 2016! It is a wonder that no one heard my screams of disbelief. How could this happen? I emailed the senior editorial manager of *ONF*, Leslie McGee, MA, as well as Mark Vrabel. There must be a mistake! They tried to calm me down, but I took this very personally. I lost sleep trying to figure out how this could have happened. I reviewed copies of the journal from 2014–2015, the time period that was included in the calculation of the rankings. I could not see anything there that would have precipitated such a fall in the rankings. I tried to mollify myself by recalling the conversations I had with other journal editors where we pretended that we were not bothered by the rankings, but it still stung.

In the 2017 rankings, released in the summer of 2018, we were ranked at No. 24 and, instead of losing sleep, this time I went into a funk. I tried to persuade myself that the rankings are important to a select group of people and our impact factor at 1.785 was respectable compared to the other specialty nursing journals. I am certainly aware that faculties consider this statistic when deliberating about tenure and promotion, and there is much pressure on nursing faculty to publish in high-impact journals. Would this translate to poorer-quality submissions? My funk deepened. And then, one day, I received a call from Leslie McGee and, with her help, I better understood the process. The message she shared with me is summarized in the following section.

Analysis

Sometimes I do my best problem solving when I have figuratively placed a problem on the shelf for a while. That was the situation here. I stopped thinking about it. Then, while making dinner on a Sunday night, it suddenly occurred to me that the business processes of a publication may affect the impact factor in some

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way—specifically, I wondered about a correlation between open access and the impact factor ranking.

The ONS journals do not charge author publication fees, and content is a benefit of membership. As a result, for most ONS journal articles, only the abstract is accessible to nonmembers without incurring a pay-per-view fee. Few articles are provided as open access. Could that be the culprit?

The challenge with the impact factor is that it includes many publications, so we cannot prove this theory. Each journal could be making simultaneous changes to their content and policies that affect their ranking. That being said, the following data point to some interesting trends related to impact factors in the Science Citation Index Expanded.

- Of the 23 publications with impact factors higher than *ONF*, 17 offer open access to authors who pay to publish, and the percentage of their content that is available freely is much higher than for *ONF*. For most of these journals, authors can repost their articles on other websites after publication, which furthers the reach of those articles. Two journals are completely open access, meaning that anyone can access the content without fee.
- Large, for-profit publishers print 20 of the journals (Elsevier publishes 10, Wiley publishes five, Sage publishes three, and Wolters Kluwer and Lippincott each publish one). The remaining three are published in collaboration with smaller, for-profit publishers or are published by associations.

ONF began offering some open-access content in 2008; however, in 2013–2014, the volume of content that was shared freely online was significantly restricted. That timetable seems to align with the change in impact factor rankings, so the availability of content in an open-access platform appears related to a journal's impact factor. After all, who prefers to pay for content when other content is available for free?

To reiterate, many factors are at play. Although we are not privy to all decisions by all journals, those journals targeting specialty audiences with limited open-access policies seem less likely to have higher impact factors.

Conclusion

Leslie's analysis helped me enormously; this change in our ranking was not really my fault. It speaks to the larger context of open-access publication and other factors in the publishing world. Although this cannot be ignored, *ONF* is published by ONS and, like other association-owned publications, falls victim to the actions of for-profit publishers. Moving forward, should we ignore the impact factor and our ranking and continue to do what we do? I believe that providing authors with a good experience, useful reviews, and timely decisions about next steps are critical. Providing our members with the best available content as a benefit of membership is essential and ultimately the reason that the journal exists. Not allowing or requiring fees for publication promotes the publication of studies and reviews from authors who do not have large grants to support their research or scholarly work.

Perhaps I am a dinosaur by remaining committed to these principles. ONS may, in time, decide to move to a different model for the journal, but that is a different matter. For now, I will keep on doing what I have been doing for the years of my tenure with the support of a dedicated and passionate team. Our commitment to the oncology nursing community and beyond is reflected in our mission statement: to disseminate the findings from oncology nursing research and to foster the translation of research evidence to practice. This is how we serve you, our readers, researchers, and authors, regardless of impact factor or ranking.

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