

## 6.11: Maximizing research visibility, impact, and citation: tips for editors and authors

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Online academic journals enhance an article's visibility, link it rapidly to the appropriate literature, and bring it to more scholars who will use it, increasing the chances of citation. Yet writing and editing an article for online publication in a way that takes advantage of these benefits differ from preparing one for print journals in a few small, but important, respects. To be cited, articles must be both visible in an electronic environment and perceptively relevant to their key audience from the outset. This chapter covers some techniques for maximizing online visibility, from selecting search engine-friendly titles and abstracts to tips for effective, but often overlooked, strategies that authors and editors can use once an article is published. It summarizes an article written for journal article authors (originally published in *Politics & Policy* at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1747-1346.2011.00342.x/full>) on what editors can do to encourage authors to write with maximum online impact in mind.

Academic journal publishing is changing. Fast. The ways scholars search for, find, store, retrieve, evaluate, and even read academic research have changed dramatically over the last decade and are likely to evolve more quickly in the future as new technologies and apps emerge. It is thus no surprise that the readership and subscription trends of many journals are moving inexorably toward online-only use. Demand for journal issues read as an integrated whole has given way to the single-article download as *the* favoured method, permitting selectivity in an era of information overload. As a result, scholars gain more freedom to tailor article consumption to their specific research needs. One consequence in terms of impact ranking is that the number of views and downloads of individual articles may be starting to count in the same way as the number of citations indexed for a piece.<sup>1,2</sup> All these developments have important implications for how an article's chances of views, downloads, and citations can be improved, by editors and authors alike.

### Maximizing visibility and citations

A few simple techniques can enhance the visibility and impact of any article without altering its central arguments or general writing style. If anything, the additional reflection should bring out the quality of a paper more strongly. Articles must still be methodologically sound and justified, well grounded theoretically, written and structured clearly, contain a solid literature review, contribute something new and useful to that literature, deliver a thorough discussion

of their findings, and offer a satisfying conclusion. Yet just a little more time spent on a few areas can do much to increase downloads and improve citation hits in an electronic environment. As a long-time academic journal editor-in-chief, I began by conducting the following checks at the point of an article's acceptance and made suggestions for changes to maximize visibility and citation potential to authors a condition of final publication. I now invite authors to reflect on these considerations (see Norman<sup>3</sup>) rather earlier – in our revise and resubmit letter – with the hope that the techniques will, in an ideal future, filter down to the majority of initial submissions.

Several publications<sup>4-8</sup> address the areas discussed below from the point of view of the author and are well worth reviewing. The following points distil the main features of these discussions and add some elements from an editor's perspective.

1. Make the article easy to find online.
2. Ensure that viewers are motivated to read on and download.
3. Make it easy for others to use and connect to related literature.
4. Use media and links creatively.
5. Use active post-publication strategies for authors

### Search engine-friendly titles

Optimal online visibility rests mainly on how easy an article is to find by those who will view, download, and (it is to be hoped) cite it. The most effective way of ensuring this is to make its title search-engine-friendly. As both producers and consumers in this market, we need a greater awareness of our own research methods for finding and selecting relevant literature in promoting search engine-savvy writing techniques.

As a paper's title largely determines how close to the top of a reader's search results it will appear, titles should be constructed carefully, with keywords in mind. Article titles are now largely sorted by machines first and humans second. As consumers of research online, our search practices already reflect an awareness of the limitations of virtual reasoning in our keyword choice and combination. As producers, we have some catching up to do!

Search engines rank literal association and clarity in titles above subtle wit or learned references to Æsop's fable of the ant and the grasshopper. Traditionally, the identity of the publishing print journal provided sufficient context for the erudite reader to appreciate such titles. Online searches

for single articles across multiple journals, publishers, and disciplines turn up a wider array of results, but search engines lack the ability to contextualize nonliteral meaning. And without a stable context, sometimes so do we. When we type in ‘hooves’, computers not only retrieve ‘horses’ before ‘zebras’, they retrieve ‘hooves’ first. As (re)searchers, we understand this; as writers, and especially editors, we need to.

The most search engine-friendly titles provide a clear description of the study’s subject and indicate its central argument or findings. This does not mean titles should be uncreative or dull. Search engines deliver initial visibility, but the human appeal determines whether an article is read or not. Including unique, memorable words and phrases in a title *together with* keywords distinguishes it in the reader’s mind, making it easier to recognize it in their download library or to find it again later on the net. Analysis conducted independently on scientific<sup>9</sup>, medical<sup>10</sup>, and psychology<sup>11</sup> journal articles also reveals a consensus that longer titles are more positively correlated to higher citations than short ones, as is a colon, an informative subtitle, and the use of non-quotidian language. So, encourage authors to ‘write for readers not robots’<sup>5</sup>, but confirm that at least the title is something the robots can understand.

One way to verify this is to run searches in different engines with prospective title(s), then enter variations of its keywords.<sup>12</sup> If the top 50 results are not close to the paper’s subject, consider suggesting a title change that shares one or two keywords with related work. A note in the acceptance letter requiring authors to conduct this check in their final polish saves time later, but a quick editorial corroboration is recommended.

There are a few exceptions to the purely descriptive title rule. Ambitious titles are trickier for search engines to handle, but if they are constructed well they can work tremendously for views and downloads in other ways. One etched forever in my brain is ‘Get your tongue out of my mouth ‘cause I’m kissin’ you goodbye: the politics of ideas’<sup>13</sup>, which still featured in the *Policy Studies Journal*’s top downloads years later. Running searches for ‘the politics of ideas’ confirms that this title is not especially search-friendly, ranking currently below 45–75 other results in various engines – although this is certainly not terrible. However, it capitalizes on the memorability factor. Together with the clear thesis statement early in the abstract – ‘country music is a crucial part of the politics of ideas, and, in fact, many policy debates are resolved in country music well before the intellectual community of policy analysts reaches a consensus’ – the cumulative effect is just too intriguing for the curious to ignore. Meier – 1; robots – 0!

#### Accurate abstracts and inviting introductions

Abstracts are vital, but often rushed, and the consequences are far more significant in an electronic environment than in a print-driven one. To an online audience, an abstract’s purpose is to reinforce the primary keywords in the title (boosting result visibility), while generating sufficient interest for the viewer to continue reading. As such, abstracts should state clearly the article’s central message

and outline its general subject, objectives, main findings, and contribution accurately. Many do not do this well from the point of view of either readers or robots.

There is widespread agreement that a good abstract should repeat the keywords in the title three or four times to optimize the way search engines rank an article in their results. (The London School of Economics<sup>12</sup> gives some excellent examples of good and poor abstracts. Hartley<sup>14</sup> discusses the finer details of abstract dos and don’ts.) It is nevertheless possible to over-optimize an abstract<sup>5,7</sup>, so curbing author zeal here is essential. The best abstracts strike a balance between breadth of appeal and depth of detail.<sup>11</sup> Above all, readers must distinguish and remember the article’s *key point*: its thesis and findings.

Clear, informative abstracts motivate views; punchy introductions that spell out the value added by the piece motivate downloads. It is then up to the quality and content of the article to generate citations. Like it or not, the advent of F-reading<sup>15,16</sup> suggests that most internet users have become accustomed to processing data in approximately 140-byte-sized portions. The tendency is to read the first paragraph in its entirety; half the second paragraph less carefully, and skim almost vertically down the rest of the page, in the form of a letter F. If nothing arrests the attention, the reader moves on, often within 40–60 s on a non-academic website. Naturally, the highly focused academic mind is likely to resist that this conclusion applies in its own case and to its own products. The general principle is nevertheless worth urging authors to note: the phrasing of the first four or six lines of the introduction can persuade a reader to continue to view and download – or not.

#### Confirm that the article is easy to use and connect to

Adapting traditional principles of good article structure to encourage online visibility and citations is also straightforward. Check that headings are arranged for easy ‘jump to’ access and that at least some reinforce the title and abstract keywords. Strong, current, comprehensive literature reviews that flag and situate the study’s original contribution are, of course, a requisite of all good articles; however, for the same reasons that good review essays tend to generate more citations than many original research articles, before deciding on rejection, do consider the citation potential of papers with less-than-ground-breaking findings if they sport a terrific literature review. They might be well worth the work involved in a revision.

Encouraging citation depends on how firmly the study is embedded in the online network of related literature. So, in addition to scholarly books, ensure that accepted papers – including historical studies – cite a respectable range of recent peer-reviewed journal articles and other online data sources that are linked to it in the HTML text of the published piece. This is important not only to facilitate rapid access for readers to related works, but also because academic search engines use more than keywords in their result-ranking algorithms; the number of pages linked to an article also counts. A paper’s citations to other online work therefore also affect its visibility via the ‘cited by’ links now offered by most search engines and some journal

publishers. Editors can help here by requiring authors to provide all webpages – for the abstract if it is not free access – of journal and newspaper articles and other sources available online cited in the bibliography, along with a recent access date. It is crucial to make authors aware that their article’s embedded links cannot be easily updated after publication. As little is more frustrating than reading an article full of dead links, all URLs referenced should be to the most authoritative, stable sites to be found.

Although different norms exist for self-citation between the sciences and social sciences and these have shifted in the past three decades,<sup>4,12,17,18</sup> Fowler and Aksnes’ study<sup>19</sup> of scientific journal articles provides detailed evidence to support the notion that moderate self-citation does pay. (However, beware of appearing to coerce authors into including citations to other articles in your journal, as this is considered to be unethical behaviour in an editor and can lead to journals being dropped from the citation indexes: see the entry on the blog site, Scholarly Kitchen, February 2012: <http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2012/02/02/when-journal-editors-coerce-authors-to-self-cite/>)

#### Creative use of media and links

Electronic distribution has primed the way for including much more than coloured graphs in a publication. Lengler and Eppler’s ‘Periodic table of visualization methods’<sup>20</sup> is a good place to begin to encourage creative data imaging in a way that increases the vibrancy, longevity, and potential uses of an article. Now that it is technically feasible, other media will certainly become an increasingly important value-added element of scholarly articles – just as they already have in the classroom. Clearly, readers in search of teaching ideas and material will be more likely to use, remember, and cite an article that also offers relevant, accessible images, animations, presentation material, podcasts, or videos than one that does not. Various editorial tactics, like listing such sources at the beginning of an article as we now do at *Politics & Policy*, can also increase views, downloads, and citations.

#### Active post-publication strategies

Linking more sites to an article increases its chances of higher search engine ranking, and several strategies can affect this positively and legitimately. Editors and publishers do much to promote an article, but the best person to find the most appropriate research networks is the author. So many scholars are now engaging in profile-raising activities that are no longer considered to be unsavoury self-promotion conducted only by the shameless. They are a necessity and can also be creative in themselves.

One successful strategy is to list several suggestions for post-publication in a general email to authors after final acceptance is confirmed. Authors can post links to their article on institutional or personal websites, share it on social networks and blogs, have it reviewed and linked in their university news bulletins, send it to colleagues, email it to local newspapers or other media outlets with a brief on how the findings are newsworthy, or add it to a relevant Wikipedia bibliography.<sup>8</sup> Authors can also link it to their Moodle or Blackboard site or initiate a student chat about

it there, link it to their online syllabi and course material, or post films of seminars or creative student presentations about it on YouTube and share them on their social networks and websites. Or one can, of course, delicately suggest that authors inveigle their colleagues to cite or link it in their work and websites.

The academic dimension of social networks like Twitter and Facebook should also not be underestimated on the basis that these sites are seen as ‘popular and therefore unscholarly’. Mollett, Moran and Dunleavy<sup>21</sup> give excellent guidelines for individuals or research groups to follow key scholars and feeds on Twitter, build online academic networks, and enhance the visibility and impact of their own work using this medium.

#### Conclusion

Applying these suggestions will require a little more effort by editors and authors than writing for traditional print journals. Yet the principles are intelligible, the modifications generally slight, and the potential improvements worth it in terms of maximizing a paper’s – and a journal’s – chances for better visibility, increased downloads, and higher citations later. None of the recommendations changes the essential components of a high-quality academic article; in fact, they should enhance them. But if editors can entice, wheedle, compel, or otherwise motivate authors to reflect on these issues and follow at least some of the suggestions, more downloads and citations are likely to result. At the very least, doing so is likely to engage authors and editors positively in thinking about the present and future impact of the academic research they publish – and that can’t be a bad thing!

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