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POINT OF VIEW

Academic publishers' time-loop: another mechanism to manipulate impact factors?

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The festive season at the end of the year is the time when it strikes us that academic publishers use their time machines to catapult their products back in time, presenting us with January and even February journal issues of the following year. For example, the February 2012 of *Cretaceous Research* was published on 30 November 2011; the January 2012 issue of *Ecology Letters* was published on 1 December 2011; the January 2012 issue of *Insect Biochemistry and Molecular Biology* appeared on 9 December 2011. This practice seems to be applied throughout the year, but at the end of the year it is most obvious because the year of publication becomes false. It is also common practice for books produced for the holiday business to be dated with the following year. There is no need to delay publications if they are ready to be published. This would be unfair to the authors and, in case of books ready for the holiday season, economically unwise. But what is the benefit of stating false publication dates? All major publishers do it: Cambridge, Elsevier, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Wiley-Blackwell.

When Eugene Garfield,[1] the creator of the *Science Citation Index*, lamented over thirty years ago 'false publication dates and other rip-offs', the problem then was publication delays. Journals were behind with their production and backdated their publications to feign timeliness. In the digital age with faster production and more predictable schedules, this problem has turned into its complete reversal. Publishers publish faster than their publication schedule (as represented in the stamped date of publication).

Why not give the correct publication dates? Is it administrative laziness or may we assume even more shady motives? Stating a later publication date in a book keeps it appearing up to date for longer; journal articles attract attention earlier, but the window relevant for counting citations for the Journal Impact Factor starts later. For most journals, including *Ecology*,[2] a longer exposure before the citation counting for the Impact Factor kicks in would likely lead to a higher number of citations,[3,4] and consequently to a higher Impact Factor. At first glance, this practice seems to buy the journal only one or two months of additional exposure. At the end of the year, however, this period grows surprisingly: for a journal issue published in December 2011 and dated December 2011, citations will be counted from January 2012 to December 2013. For a journal issue published in December 2011, but dated January 2012, citations will be counted from January 2013 to December 2014. This is because the citing authors determine from which year their citations date. Citing authors generally cite the publication date given on the paper or the journal, trusting that this is correct. At the end of the year, the practice of post-dating buys journal issues another year of exposure and moves the citations counts for the Journal Impact Factor closer to the peak of citedness for most journals.

Whether this effect is intended by publishers, or just tolerated, it is likely to increase Journal Impact Factors. At any rate, even if not all journals are affected considerably, the publication date should be the date of the actual publication, not a meaningless clerical tool that can be used at will to influence citation metrics.

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