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Anniversaries and half-lives

Summary

Reflects on the anniversaries of LIS journals and of databases. Considers whether the bibliometric half-life of a journal is of more significance than the often-quoted impact factor.

Keywords

LIS journals; bibliometrics; half-life; Medline; information history

Journal of Documentation celebrated its 60th anniversary recently, marked by the reprinting of a series of significant papers from its six decades, with expert commentaries on them. Of our sister journals, *Program* celebrated a 40th birthday in 2006, while *Aslib Proceedings* is also approaching its 60th.

The information services which these journals document also have anniversaries. *Medline*, arguably the archetypal online database, celebrated its 35th anniversary in 2006, having grown from serving 25 users in 1971 to servicing 77 million accesses and 800 million separate searches in 2006 (http://www.nlm.nih.gov/news/medline_35th_birthday.html).

That anniversaries provoke reflection is a truism: particularly the 30-year and 60-year anniversaries, which conventionally mark one and two generations. The reflections around the *JDoc* series centred around the continuing relevance of much of the material being reviewed. It may be, of course, that simply reflects the fact that 'there is nothing new under the sun'; that the same problems and issues reoccur, sometimes under different names. While there is some truth in this, it sits uneasily with the fact that there is progress and change in the information sciences, that problems are solved, and that some issues simply go away, and do not return. When I embarked on information science research, it was in the context of what were then real and unsolved problems as to how to store, retrieve and analyse large files of chemical structure data. These problems have largely been solved, though they have been succeeded by others, and the methods used to solve them may still be of relevance elsewhere.

There must therefore be a different explanation for the continuing interest and relevance, beyond the purely historical, of older published material. In the case of *JDoc*, this is validated by the relatively high bibliometric half-life of the journal, a measure of the length of time for which its papers continue to be cited (Line 1970, Griffith, Servi, Anker and Drott 1979). The detailed reasons for this could be the subject of a study in themselves, but I believe that they are related to the focus of *JDoc*, over its entire history, on conceptual and fundamental material, and on an unapologetically 'academic' approach. These factors are likely to promote a longer life-time for a journal's contents.

The half-life measure has been somewhat neglected, with a journal's 'quality' more likely to be assessed by ISI's 'impact factor', a measure of the extent of recent citations to the journal [a measure in which, for the record, *JDoc* also scores highly].

With this in mind, it is worth asking what an academic journal is for, two generations on from the foundation of this particular example. Not for immediate and rapid dissemination of results and opinions, in the age of the blog and the webpage pre-print. Nor for quick interactions by experts, to produce a consensus view of a subject, in the age of the wiki. And certainly not for the bringing together of related materials, when that is what search engines are for.

It seems to me that it will increasingly be the case that the function of a quality academic journal will increasingly be as an 'active archive', whose function is to keep available the most significant results, opinions and evaluations within a discipline, over a long time period, so that lessons may be learned, and analogies grasped, from the past. I do not see any other form of information resource capable of undertaking this task for a whole discipline, too broad to be encompassed by monographs and the like. This implies a focus on principles - albeit

necessarily exemplified by issues of the time - and on theory - albeit necessarily illuminated by issues of practice.

The evidence of success in this respect would be a long bibliometric half-life for the source, rather than the more ephemeral impact factor. On that measure, *JDoc* already has a good extent of success, which we intend to develop further in the future.

David Bawden

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