

QUALITY IN A SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL

The concept of quality is conditioned by the requirements of the desired product, and in the case of a scientific publication it becomes necessary to focus on the fundamental elements of such quality. These can be grouped in three areas: contents, formal structure and timely production.

The quality of the contents of a scientific journal can be considered as the most important of all. It is determined by the scientific level of the authors, and by the level and rigorousness of the editorial body and its referees. Editors and referees vary according to the reach –local, national, regional or global– and the nature –general, specialized or multidisciplinary– of the publication. However, their roles are equally crucial in determining the quality, inclusive of the unavoidable consideration of ethical standards and the celerity that is demanded from them by the community and the rhythm of the advancement of science.

Formal structure plays a most relevant role in publications and guidelines have been established to this end. A component of quality is that related to the formal coherence of the material, such as presentation patterns, quotations, references, symbols and abbreviations. These aspects derive from the correct presentation and instructions followed by authors; but depend in a high degree upon the vision of the editorial body, which has to care for the quality of the final product. On the other hand are the elements of the physical presentation –layout and print quality– that conform the visible aspect, both of the printed and of the electronic versions, and are equally conditioned by the actions of the editorial body.

In advanced countries the first two aspects, content and appearance, monopolize the attention of those responsible for scientific publications. Regularity and punctuality is taken for granted. But in many developing countries, and

certainly in Latin America, regular and timely production is an obstacle for many scientific journals. This situation is determined both by cultural and financial factors, the former being of higher relevance. The inherited peninsular thinking, coupled with procrastination, has led people to be lax with the concept of punctuality, while in other latitudes the latter is expected.

Quality controls included in the process of registration, evaluation and validation of journals in our countries are centered mostly on formal structure, which is easier to ascertain. Other elements of quality are harder to evaluate, and the qualitative scales applied in other countries, such as the impact factor, are of restricted application. This is due to a small number of indexed publications, language limitations, and the limited reach of journals in the international context in which the mainstream of science develops: precisely where the impact factor is measured.

Given that quality is a function of the established requirements, or of the existing expectations, it depends largely on cultural elements, both objective and subjective. Punctuality turns out to be very poor in some countries where programs to promote scientific journals, printed or electronic, are executed with pronounced delays, as if those responsible for them ignore that a periodic publication, to be truly periodic, requires a regular and timely production. This, in turn, depends on the timely payment of all expenses derived from every phase of publication.

While the authorities responsible for the programs for financing scientific publications do not fully assume their responsibility, quality standards will not be fulfilled. On the contrary, journals will progressively disappear in some of our countries, rather than increasing their quality.

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