

Extracting Oneself from the Citation-stacking Bear Trap

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Introduction

This journal has unwittingly fallen into a citation-stacking bear trap. This has meant that it has temporarily lost its “Impact Factor,” the journal rating system created by Thompson Reuters’ Web of Science.

Impact Factors (IF) have excited considerable interest in the scientific community and are very important to journals and the research community, as they give some indication as to the degree to which papers published in those journals have been cited. Notwithstanding their undoubted success, there are varying claims about the extent to which IFs drive rewards and behaviours [1], and discriminate between different disciplines [2].

What is Citation-stacking?

The “offence” of which this Journal has been found “guilty” is that of citation-stacking. Citation-stacking is defined on a publisher’s website as an improper citation relationship between a group of journals [3]; with the purpose of increasing or otherwise manipulating citation statistics. It is generally recognised to be a bad thing, and broke into the public domain when it became apparent that a group of journals were actively citing each other’s work [4]. Analysts are now looking to develop better tests to identify

this type of behaviour, and it is recognised that more needs to be done [5].

What Happened to this Journal?

During 2008 and 2009 there were calls within the International Medical Informatics Association (IMIA) for its fifth decade to be characterised by more high quality translational communication, of research and education [6, 7]. Out of this came the vision for a Journal on Applied Clinical Informatics (ACI), which is produced by the same publisher as this journal [8]. Within the relationship between Methods and ACI came a scientifically, intellectual and practical wish to link theory (in Methods) to practice (in ACI). Mutual citation was taken as progress towards the goal of establishing high quality translational communication. It was felt to be of great interest and importance to make efforts to bridge between theory and practice and develop linkages within the knowledge base in biomedical and health informatics.

Unwittingly Falling into the Bear Trap

This wish to link theory and practice has led us to fall into a bear trap. The temptation once in a bear trap might be to struggle, to fight to break free. This might make things worse as it may both cause us to become ever more trapped as well as potentially frighten away potential rescuers. We consider that the summary nature of the way that an IF is taken away and the lack of publically published algorithms (that might have enabled this or other journals, to know whether it has just or substantially crossed the line) are unjust.

Bear Trap:

- Literally, a bear trap is a large trap that catches and holds down a bear. If the bear struggles it can become further injured, even die. It can be challenging to release a bear from the trap
- In finance a bear trap is where investors are trapped, by buying short, at the bottom of the market
- In literature it is often used to describe a situation someone gets into unwittingly and from which it is then emotionally difficult to escape

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Methods Inf Med 2016; 55: 301–302

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3414/ME16-03-0001>

received: July 8, 2016

accepted in revised form: July 8, 2016

epub ahead of print: July 20, 2016

However, our judgement is that whilst this journal has been a victim of an injustice it may be best not to fight and instead to stay calm and focus on how to extract ourselves.

Getting out of the Bear Trap

What matters most to the European Federation of Medical Informatics (EFMI) is that *Methods of Information in Medicine* escapes from this bear trap as quickly as possible. *Methods* is an official EFMI journal and we will stand by the journal through this. We wish to clearly and publicly make the following points:

- We do not expect the Journal or its Editor to apologise for falling into a bear trap, it is not something anyone sets out to do.
- We find no evidence of wrong doing or attempts by *Methods* or its Editors to cynically manipulate its citation rates.
- We would like the journal to cease any practices that might be construed as citation-stacking.

- We hope that the journal's impact factor can be restored as quickly as possible.
- We will continue to support analyses to understand the full spectrum of translational challenges, and specifically how to bridge between theory (e.g. *Methods*) and practice (e.g. *ACI*).
- Part of moving the field of biomedical and health informatics forward scientifically, methodologically and professionally requires greater links between theory and practice and we now need to find other ways to achieve this.

We urge everyone to continue this excellent journal, and for all of us to avoid unwittingly stumbling into bear traps as we go along our way.

Conflict of Interest

Anne Moen is President of EFMI, and Simon de Lusignan is Publications Officer of EFMI. Simon de Lusignan as part of his EFMI role is a member of the Editorial Board of *Methods*. Anne Moen is a member of the Editorial Board of *ACI*.

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