

## **Local Journal Syndrome in the International Network**

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A local journal is a periodical serving a localised geographical readership and edited by local voluntary enthusiasts from the same region who are amateur journalists but experienced professionals. In many countries these journals are edited and published from the same office usually a government or related agency (ie. ministry, departments etc), academic and research institution (i.e. universities, research centres, etc), professional and learned bodies (i.e. society, association, etc), or voluntary group of dedicated professionals. The main objectives of the editors of these local journals is to provide a podium for local research works, maintain the publication frequency of the journal with reasonable “quality” of published works and aim at gaining entrance into the international network. To achieve these, the editors of local journals frequently run into series of problems which lower the quality of the journal resulting in what often referred to as “local journal syndrome” (LJS).

The international network refer to periodicals serving world-wide readership, edited by groups of remunerated professional editors, published by an international publishing agency and listed by many international database indexers. As opposed to local journal it receives and publishes up-to-date high quality scientific material from worldwide centres and shows consistency in all aspects of editorial procedures. The network is not necessarily affiliated to any organisation and their commercial and editorial sections are separated. The international publishing agencies and database indexers can also be regarded as part of the “international network” because of their prejudice against local journals.

LJS is a state of progressive deterioration of the outcome and administration of local journals (as judged by increasing local criticism) due to lack of recognition of local (academic and service institutions) and international organisations as well as lack of financial support. It has four levels of negative manifestations namely those on the quality of published works, editors and referees of same journals, local academic and service institution, and country of origin of the journal.

It is important to consider primarily the contents and consistency of all published material particularly their originality, importance, scientific relevance, contribution to science, validity, editorial procedures, layout, graphics, illustrations, ethics, copyright, adherence to format, scope and policies of the journal, etc.

There is a misunderstanding that it is prevalent in the developing countries and absent in Europe and America. It should be noted here that some of the most important

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science journals of the international network are published from Asia while many European journals show some form of manifestations of LJS.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the causes and manifestations of LJS and recommend lines of treatment. In addition, using the podium of the *Bahrain Medical Bulletin* and its regional and international readership, this work is also directed to the policy makers of all academic and service institutions particularly those of the Middle East.

### **CAUSES OF LJS**

These can best be appreciated if we examine the interaction of the three inter-related cyclic dilemmas (Mohammad 1995<sup>1</sup>). The first is the lack of credit given by local academic, professional and service institutions to locally published material. Consequently, many outstanding local articles will be submitted for publication elsewhere thus depriving the local journals of such material to raise their standard.

The second is the lack of international recognition by the academic, professional and service institutions to publish their works in local journals thus depriving them of good articles essential to raise their standard and encourage other institutions to credit works published in these local journals. Similarly the egression of international database indexers not to list locally published works irrespective of their quality will also result in poor interest of the international writers and the academic and service institutions to publish their works in poorly exposed journals.

The third dilemma is the lack of financial support given to local journals thus restricting their development, circulation, revenue, advertisement, royalties, subscription, copyright, etc. and forcing the editors to accept compromises at the expense of the standard of the journal.

### **MANIFESTATIONS OF LJS**

The first manifestation is the continuous deterioration in the standard and quality of published works as judged by increasing local readership criticism. This criticism comes mainly from the professionals and frequently from the executives of the local academic and service institutions. It does not come from their counterpart in the international network. As a result, a combination of the following presentations may be encountered:

1. The published works are not truly original, add nothing to present status of knowledge and have no scientific or applied significance. They are either duplicates of other works appearing in other journals or previously published. The results of these works are also outdated and not valid. The authenticity, processing, and interpretation of data is questionable.
2. The published works are outside the scope or field of the journal and the interest of the local region and its readership reflecting that very little research work is generated from the local geographic area of the journal thus forcing the editors to accept any low quality works sent to them. It also reflects that

highly specialised works are rejected by the international journals because of their low standard and quality. They are dumped into the local journals.

3. Inconsistency in the structure, framework, contents, and editorial style reflects that the “Instructions to Authors” were not followed. The editors and the referees are unaware of these inconsistencies indicating that the articles submitted for publication were not read by anyone other than the authors. There will also be numerous language and spelling mistakes. The figures and numbers do not tally. Similarly the published figures, illustrations, artwork, pictures, etc. are of poor quality and do not illustrate the contents and results of the text. The inconsistencies also include aspects related to policies, procedures, guidelines, copyright, ethical values, production and printing, and advertisement.
4. The bibliography is old, un-retrievable, referring to basic known and established facts, and in languages that the author certainly cannot read.
5. Local journal may have initial success in listing into one or more regional or international database indexers. These agencies after verifying low citation and impact indexes will decline further listing often citing shortage of space in a highly competitive market.

The second manifestation of LJS is the position of editors of local journals. These people are voluntary journalists whose main aims, with the limited resources available to them, are to maintain reasonable quality and standard, provide a podium for local publishable works, and attempt to gain entrance into the international network by fulfilling the requirements of the publishers and international database indexers<sup>2</sup>. They are not remunerated. Their effort is seldom accredited by their employers or recognised by the local academic and service institutions. They may be even regarded as wasting time and resources. Even moral support is lacking. They are also criticised by local readership and authors as the primary people responsible for the LJS of their region while the academic and service institutions undermine their effort by regarding the local journal as “not recognised” and “unrefereed”. Faced with lack of appreciation and increasing criticism in addition to the effects of the three cyclic dilemmas, they become increasingly frustrated and demoralised and find themselves influenced to publish works of mixed quality thus exaggerating the LJS. The demoralisation could even reflect on their professional practice. It can also extend to involve the referees and they become non co-operative thus adding more burden on the responsibility of the editors.

The third manifestation of LJS is the effect on the academic and service institutions and their professionals for not supporting and contributing their works to local journals. This would mean that the first cyclic dilemma responsible for the LJS (i.e. lack of local credit by the institutions) could backfire on these institutions. In this situation very few research articles are sent for publication to local journals and these low quality works discredit their authors and institution. Subsequently, very few articles originating from these organisations will be published. Accordingly they will be regarded by the scientific community as obstructive and defying their primary purpose for not doing any research. Furthermore, these organisations will lose

scientific credibility. Their budget will be trimmed. Therefore, they do not have enough resources to send their data to the international network.

The fourth manifestation of LJS is the effect on the country of origin of the local journals. It should be noted here that the progress of science in any country is measured by the number and quality of published works reflecting the degree of activity and interest for research carried out in the country. It also reflects the commitment of the country to support (financially or otherwise) research programs and the availability of credible research centres and professional expertise who can lead research regionally and internationally. Furthermore, the availability of local journals of diverse specialities in any country would also mean a growing and active interest for research.

As a result of the LJS, there will not only be few articles published annually in the local journals but also few credible local journals reflecting that few articles are originating from the local research centres of the country and very few of these are published. The published works are of low quality reflecting lack of capable professionals to do research, no facilities and financial support, and low local research interests in the country. This would mean that the country is not contributing enough and not supporting research. It would be embarrassing to the administrators and politicians to explain this situation on the international arena especially in countries with sound financial resources. Even the scientific credibility of the country and its research centres will be at stake.

### **TREATMENT OF LJS**

The first dilemma is that local academic and service institutions give credit to their journals and this will promote editors to publish only high quality works. . With this new environment the international writers will publish their works in these journals thus raising their standard further and this will subsequently encourage indexing agencies to list them. Furthermore, recognition of local institutions will influence commercial advertising agencies thus increasing the circulation of the journal and revenues. Once this is found lucrative, the regional or even international publisher will take over. With this scenario the demoralisation of the editors will ease, research budgets to the institutions will be maintained and the image of the country of origin of the local journal will also improve.

Tackling the second dilemma is not as effective as addressing the issue of local recognition. However, local, regional and international scientific experts of prominence must be invited to contribute their original, review and commissioned works into local journals. This should eventually raise the standard of these journals, encourage the local institutions to accept them, promote local competitive participation, decrease local antagonism and criticism, bolster advertisement to ensure financial survival, improve the impact and citation indexes required by the international database indexers to list them, and may ultimately find a publisher to shoulder international dissemination.

The third dilemma is financial. Ideally, a publisher should take this responsibility. But in most third World countries with budding local journals, this is not an easy solution

because most of the publishing agencies are small private enterprises not eager to venture their resources into what might be considered “adventurous” project.

With adequate financial support, editors of local journals will distance themselves from time-consuming tasks (e.g. office management, public relation, advertisement, follow-up subscriptions, etc.) and concentrate their effort on ways to raise the quality of published material necessary for international dissemination. Therefore, work published in these journals is recognised and efforts of the editors are accredited. It is essential to address suitable remuneration to editors whose contribution to science and research is vitally important.

Editors of local journals can utilise the information technology by developing their own internet website to show all published local work if funds are available. These journals can therefore gain access into the international network without the need of publisher or the international database indexing agencies.

While attempting to treat LJS it is important to examine the situation of editors and referees of the journals and ways to address their remuneration, recognition, effort, and contribution to local journalism.

### **Quality of Content and of Editorial Procedures**

Editors of local journals must establish clear policies and objectives covering the scope of the journal, duties of editors and referees, editorial policies and procedures, and the relationship with the publisher and other agencies. The policies and “scope of the journal” should appear (at least on every volume) on the journal to show the readers and authors the diversity of coverage as well as the type and speciality of the journal.

Material appearing in local journals must be truly ethical, conforming with international standards respecting animal and human rights. The quality of papers used for printing must conform to certain specifications to ensure proper recycling for environmental protection.

Local science editors must promote science journalism and attract original high quality relevant works. There should be no compromise on quality and editors must resist all influences to satisfy local geopolitical and commercial environment, benefactor, academic and service institution, or peers in the profession.

The quality of the editorial procedures must also be addressed and the opinion of “scientific editors” should therefore be sought. All submitted works must be read by the editor and refereed by specialists whose joint concern must be the high quality of publishable material. For these reasons a “ manual for editors and referees” must be formulated to ensure consistency between one evaluator and another. The views of the referees may be different from those of the editors and at this level democracy, impartiality, ethical considerations, and confidentiality must be practised. Nonetheless, editors must be flexible in deciding the suitability of certain works if they fall outside the “scope of the journal” depending of course on many factors as shall be governed by the time. The role of the editors and referees must also be extended from assessing and deciding on the suitability of works, to education

pointing the main reason for rejection and how the authors could modify their submitted articles. All rejected works must therefore be returned with editorial remarks to the authors for the purpose of continuous learning. The author who has spent minimum of 54 hours and the co-authors who spent 20 hours writing that paper must be treated courteously.

### ***Credit to Local Journals***

Most local journal's authors, editors and referees by themselves are members of various committees and boards of their local institutions and these people should use their influence to change the policies and roles of the institution to credit local journals and works published in them. This pressure will be rewarded with perseverance from all parties. It is in the benefit of everybody to support local journals because their works can be published rapidly unlike those of the international network which frequently reject high quality works coming from certain parts of the world. On the other hand, authors and editors of local journals must not abuse the trust and credit given to them by the academic and service institutions and publish any inferior material.

Regrettably, some of the above "assessors cum authors, editors, and referees" of local journals play a double role while attending to the business of committees and boards of their institutions. They support their local journals as a "public relation propaganda". But when they sit on the respective committees and boards they become passive, and negative to their local journals. They demand publications in international network when their own existence on the "chair" and "service" has been achieved through local publications. The action of these "hypocrites" demonstrates professional jealousy and personal attempts to prevent promotion of others. They attempt to preserve themselves as the only "Gods" and "Masters" in the field who had reached the unreachable rank. This is a very difficult situation to treat since these "Gods" are usually highly influential and entrenched in the establishment. Therefore, there is a need to rejuvenate membership of committees and boards of local journals and institutions to ensure the presence and persistence of the younger generation of professionals and editors who could lead and maintain new and neutral outlook of local journalism.

Criticism of local journals comes mainly from the professionals of local academic and service institutions reflecting their "inferiority complexes" and not from the international academic network which look at the importance, merits, quality, and applications of the published works rather than the name of the local journal and from where it is published.

Furthermore, some institutions would only consider published works listed by certain indexing agencies and would ignore non-indexed works. This is a ridiculous practice in this present age of globalisation and unrestricted dissemination of information as provided by internet network. It is now possible to make available on the world wide web any published material irrespective of their quality or origin and these can be searched, accessed, and downloaded in seconds thus nullifying the need (and even the existence) of the international indexing agencies or international publisher. This also means that any local journal can access the international network with the use of computer publishing technology and make their publications available to international

internet users. The institutions must also address this favourably and not to assume double standard practice by encouraging technology studies and denying its applied practice.

In the Middle East, there are many institutions (e.g. those of Egypt and Saudi Arabia), which give high credit to works published not only locally but also regionally (i.e. the Arabian Gulf) so as to support other peripheral journals. In these cases of equality, it is the institutions, which seek the credit of the journals and not *vice versa*. Some of these journals are not listed or in one or two international database indexers.

During the 1970s, many scientific works were produced and there were few local journals to publish them in developed countries. In order to promote local journals, the government and institutions gave equal credit to locally published works as those of the international network. As a result there was a long “waiting list” and authors of high quality works had to wait their turn for publication. The rejection rate was high and this resulted in increasing the number of issues and volumes of the local journals as well as the proliferation of more local journals and the production of many specialised ones to cope with the increasing demands for publication. The Saudi institutions had to enlarge the scope of recognition by extending credit to works published in regional (i.e. Arabian Gulf) journals. This not only benefited the Saudi authors in finding additional avenues, but also the peripheral journals for receiving high quality works. The Saudi experience with local scientific journals is a repetition of what has happened in USA, UK and other European countries when they started with few unaccredited journals and proliferated to a vast array of specialised and indexed periodicals.

Traditionally and probably one of the most effective ways to guarantee local credit is that academic and service institutions with active research centres should have their own “affiliated” journal as a podium. In the Middle East, this method has successfully been implemented in Egypt, Iraq and Saudi Arabia to the benefit of all parties. In this case the authors, editors and referees are members of the organisation using their influence on research, promotion, appointment committees and available resources in order to promote local publications. There will be internal and external quality control so as not to compromise on quality because this will reflect negatively on the journal, the institution, and the country.

### ***Not-Recognised and Unrefereed Journals***

The term “not recognised” is “unofficially” used by the institutions and publicly by many professionals (with inferiority complex) to label a local journal as being “inferior to a set of imaginary standard”. This situation must be questioned here since there is no local or universal agreement as to the organization, which has the authority for this “recognition” and what is to be recognized in the first place. Is it the academic and service institutions, professional and affiliated bodies, international indexing agencies, the publisher, etc. Who is this imaginary authority. After all it is the content of the journal and the quality of published works which must be assessed, and not the name of the journal or the country of publication.

“Unrefereed” journals are different matter. The practice of some local journals to publish works as submitted by the authors without sending it to referees is wrong and

will definitely be manifested in a LJS. Editors striving to gain credibility and access to the international network must ensure that all submitted works are read and edited by themselves as well as by specialist referees who are members of the academic and service institutions. Although editors hold the ultimate authority to decide on the suitability of any article, the views of referees must be considered.

### ***Publishers of Local Journals***

Journals in the international network are published by international publishing agencies whereas the situation with local journals varies from one journal to another. Who should publish local journals? An independent editorial board, a professional publishing house, the government, the university, or the professional and learned societies? The answers to these questions are debatable and need to be left to the circumstances of each local journal. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to encourage the growth of “local publishers” who in time would assume the responsibility of the region and then proliferate into the international network.

In addition, since most local journals are affiliated to a local institution and also receive annual grants from other organisations, it is important to question affiliation and funding of these journals. Is it advisable to have the local journals affiliated to societies to guarantee funding? Who should fund local journals not affiliated to societies? What is the future and prospect of local journals without funding in the third world? Would an annual grant from the government or academic agencies raise the issue of bias? What is bias and can the institutions manipulate the editors of local journals to bias on a well-established scientific opinion? Is it essential to establish neutrality and what is the definition of “neutrality” in a world of changing values? Again, the answers to these questions are debatable and need to be left to the decision of each journal depending on its local circumstances.

Regional and international publishers will not take advantage of local journals unless the commercial side is studied and made profitable. Many publishers examine the name of editors and institutions and their contribution to science. In any case, the international and regional networks are saturated with science journals of all fields and international publishers are not interested to support duplicates unless the theme of the journal is towards specialisation.

### ***Database Indexing Agencies***

The international database indexing agencies are monopolies of organisations highly influenced by the name of international publisher, the geopolitical origin of the journal, and the names of the editors. For example, some journals published by the international publishing firms from selected parts of the world and edited by renowned professionals in the field are listed (in these databases) from the first issue of the journal, whereas those published by regional agencies from the developing countries and edited by equally notable expertise will be denied listing even after 25 years of continuous and consistent publication.

To gain acceptance into the international database indexers, the editors of local journals should fulfil all the criteria required for listing. These may vary from one indexer to another but they are generally a set of standards concerned primarily with



the quality and relevance of published works as outlined before. Consideration will also be given to the name of publisher and editor, affiliation and sponsorship of the journal, layout and contents, subscription, listing in other database, years in publication, citation and impact indexes, printing paper, etc. It is worth noting here that section on “Letter to the Editors” appeals to most indexers because it shows the amount of discussion generated by the local readership to subjects of common interest.

The process of application and review is lengthy and frustrating and frequently ends in denial of listing often citing excuses as no priority or lack of space. This is not because the requirements are difficult to satisfy but because of geopolitical monopolies and undeclared discriminatory criteria practised by most international indexers so as to list only certain names (of editors and publishers) from certain countries. But editors of local journals must not lose faith since each repeated application for listing means that significant, progressive and demonstrable signs of improvement in the quality of published material have already been made in the journal to continuously raise its standard.

The denial of listing by international database indexers of the contents of local journals which is the second cyclic dilemma results in LJS and ending in frustration of the local editors who are doing their utmost to comply with requirements. Fortunately, over the last 15 years there emerged a number of competitive regional databases in all fields of science which editors of local journals must attempt their listing.

Finally it is important to ask what makes the international indexers international and who decide on this? It is the inferiority complex of the professionals of the local academic and service institutions, which gives high credit to international indexers at the expense of local works. As an alternative, it should again be highlighted that local journal can easily and effectively list themselves internationally through the internet and without the need of any international publisher or indexing agency.

### ***Editors and Referees of Local Journals***

Editors, referees and reviewers are the backbone of any successful journal. They have editorial responsibility to evaluate, edit, and decide on the suitability of submitted works and also educational duties while communicating (through the editors) with authors and in organising training courses on “scientific writing”. Furthermore, in the case of local journals they frequently shoulder other time-consuming duties such as proofreading, office management, publication and distribution of the journal, public relation, advertisement, subscription, etc.

The effort of the editors and referees, which is an integral part of their professional duty, must be appreciated, credited and remunerated because voluntary work without proper recognition will ultimately lead to frustration and demoralisation and this will reflect negatively on the journal and the quality of published works. This reflection does not mean that they are responsible for the low quality works because their demoralisation is a manifestation of LJS and not the cause of the syndrome. It is therefore essential that the principal employers of the editors recognise their effort and regard them as credit and asset to the institutions and country serving as authoritative scientific journalists. There are a number of ways to acknowledge this effort; the

appropriateness of which can only be decided at the local level of the journal depending on their local environment and noting here that financial remuneration is not the main incentive.

Editors must not dissociate themselves from the referees irrespective of the atmosphere of frustration or demoralisation. The support of the referees is important for the survival of the journal and their influential role to break the cyclic dilemmas of LJS. To enlarge their support they should be involved the daily running of the journal.

They should therefore be invited to share responsibilities at the editorial desk, assume membership of various “boards and committees” of the journal, involved in major decision making issues, and commissioned to write reviews of local common interest. Again the appropriate way to acknowledge the contribution of referees must be left to the local journal depending on local circumstances.

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