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Popularity or prestige: are you making the right impact?

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When researchers compile resumes quoting indices such as the $h$-index and citation counts, they often mention any prestigious journals they have published in. This is natural; even if your paper receives no citations, simply being admitted into a leading journal confers an element of prestige on your career. However, have you ever wondered who is actually citing you? Being cited by your colleagues and junior researchers in your department is one thing, but what if your academic hero cites your work? Imagine finding out that your paper was read and acknowledged by the leading researcher(s) in your field; would that not be a more valuable indicator that your ideas are valuable? And what if a Nobel Prize winner cited your work? If a paper was read and acknowledged by the leading researcher(s) in your field; would that not be a more valuable indicator that your ideas are valuable? And what if a Nobel Prize winner cited your work?

Ying Ding, Assistant Professor in the School of Library and Information Science at Indiana University, the US, believes citations from recognized experts should count for more. In a recent paper, co-authored with Blaise Cronin, “Popular and/or prestigious? Measures of scholarly esteem”, she explores whether taking the source of a citation into account can help identify groundbreaking contributions to a subject area, in this case, the field of information retrieval. (1)

Ding makes a clear distinction between: “popularity, which is how many citations a paper receives, irrelevant of who is making the citation, and prestige, which gives greater weight to citations coming from highly cited papers.”

She is concerned that raw citation counts might identify educational or other general-interest texts, especially review articles, as the most highly cited works in a field. It is possible to receive a large number of citations from non-experts, but Ding believes that experts in the field are more likely to be citing groundbreaking discoveries.
the authors identified as prestigious remain in the top-10 for far longer than those who are popular.

She explains: “Popularity doesn’t last because ideas and technologies change. This is why prestige is a better way to identify groundbreaking papers. For instance, a textbook might initially receive a lot of citations, but (depending on how fast the field moves) this will eventually become outdated. On the other hand, real contributions to a field will be cited for a long time. If a paper introduces concepts or terminologies that become building blocks in the field, then many people will cite them for a longer time.”

Some papers are only identified as prestigious, indicating they are only receiving citations from the most-cited papers. This suggests that the content is so innovative that only the leaders in the field are capable of identifying their importance. Ding points out: “If we don’t weight citations, these papers would fall to the bottom of the list, as they don’t receive a high number of citations. However, if the experts are citing this work, it is important that we can see this.”

From popularity to prestige
According to Ding, prestige should be the ultimate aim of all scientists, since this means you have contributed something of real and lasting value to your field.

“Ultimately, ‘prestige’ measures whether you have made significant contributions, which first requires experience and deep understanding of your subject. Not everyone can become a thought leader, and measuring prestige helps us understand which researchers have achieved this level. It helps us understand which authors are being read by the best researchers,” she explains.

And how should researchers work towards this prestige? According to Ding, “you have to write better papers! My strategy starts with only reading the best papers. It’s not possible to read everything, so you should limit your reading to the very best journals and papers in your field. You also need to reserve time for critical thinking. Keep asking yourself ‘what is missing, what can I add?’ There’s no point following the crowd.”

And what about Ding herself; is she putting her theory into practice? “Prestige is obviously my ultimate ambition because that would mean I’ve managed to make a lasting contribution, but I first need to make myself highly cited, so this is what I’m currently working towards.”

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