

CURRENT COMMENTS

The Gordian Knot of Journal Coverage: Why We Can't Put All the Journals You Want into the Current Contents Edition You Read

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When you publish an information service like CC[®] with six disciplinary editions, there is no way you can please all of the people all of the time. I cannot think of a problem about which there is more disagreement than journal coverage. We can't please the editor of a botany journal who is slighted because his "obviously life science" journal is not covered in *CC/Life Sciences*. Nor can we satisfy the engineer who thinks all applied physics journals should be in *CC/Engineering, Technology & Applied Sciences*.

I am well aware of these journal coverage problems because I meet so many CC readers in my travels. I also receive hundreds of letters each year and survey readers by mail and phone. A recent letter expressed a common criticism of CC coverage:

"My chief complaint would be that CC/Agriculture, Biology & Environmental Sciences is treated as a poor second cousin of CC/Life Sciences. This year you dropped Nature and Science from

CC/AB&ES. Why? Do you think 'agriculture' scientists don't need such first-rate journals or is it (as it seems) a scheme to get some of us to subscribe to both issues?"

"...Why don't you do a survey of the subscribers to CC/AB&ES to see what journals, now covered in CC/LS, would be useful additions to CC/AB&ES? If a lot of subscribers are like me (those in the fields of ecology, etc.), my guess is that there are relatively few (in my case about 20) journals that, if added to CC/AB&ES, would make CC/LS unnecessary. Much of CC/LS is now noise for me."

I answered this person with a letter, but his questions are quite typical. So the main points of my response should interest most CC subscribers, but especially those who read *CC/AB&ES*, *CC/Clinical Practice*, and *CC/ET&AS*.

It is true that *CC/AB&ES* is treated differently than *CC/Life Sciences*. But from ISI[®]'s viewpoint it is treated more like a preferred youngest brother or sister than a poor cousin. *CC/Life*

Sciences and *CC/Physical & Chemical Sciences*, the big brother editions with the largest number of subscribers, actually subsidize the costs of producing other *CC* editions.

For example, if there were no *CC/LS*, *CC/AB&ES* would indeed be difficult to justify financially. This is because the audience for applied biology is much smaller than that for the life sciences generally. J. Levitt of the Carnegie Institution of Washington explained the problem when he pointed out that botanists cite basic life and physical science literature, but basic scientists don't cite botanists.¹ Botany journals have few outside readers. This was reflected in our citation study of the journals in this discipline.² For these reasons botanists doing basic research usually subscribe to *CC/LS*.

We do, however, cover the top botany journals in *CC/LS* for the benefit of non-botanists who just want an overview of what is going on in that field. But it would be too costly and of little help to most *CC/LS* readers to attempt to be *comprehensive* in botany, or in agriculture and environmental science—two other areas that may be of minor interest to *CC/LS* readers.

The deletion of *Science*, *Nature*, and other journals from *CC/AB&ES* is not a scheme to make two editions of *CC* necessary. Rather it is a response to reality. Over 50% of *CC/AB&ES* readers cover these journals by reading

CC/Life Sciences. By minimizing the overlap between the two editions, half of *CC/AB&ES* buyers do not have to pay twice for the same information. Deletion of these two very large journals enabled us to cover many less accessible journals.

Suppose we published *CC/AB&ES* as though *CC/Life Sciences* didn't exist. We would have to add to it hundreds of journals now covered in *CC/LS*. This was clearly proven when we did a study of the literature cited by agriculture scientists.³ While one subscriber may assert he or she needs only 20 more journals, the total number reaches the hundreds when other readers' needs are considered.

And suppose we disregarded all other costs of duplicating this coverage. Just the paper and printing of these extra pages would be a significant added expense. Although some agriculture-oriented subscribers to *CC/Life Sciences* would *switch* to the new *CC/AB&ES*, we would probably gain very few *new* subscribers. There is no evidence that there is a large number of applied biologists out there waiting for a self-sufficient *CC/AB&ES*. However, such a change could result in a significant cost and price increase for both editions.

The harsh truth is that *CC/Agriculture, Biology & Environmental Sciences* is a supplement to *CC/Life Sciences*. It is in effect the *applied biology* section of

CC/LS. Similarly *CC/Clinical Practice* is the *applied medicine* supplement to *CC/LS* and *CC/ET&AS* is the *applied science* supplement to *CC/P&CS*.

Actually, this will be no surprise to those who have used *CC/AB&ES* since its first issue. I stated then that "many life scientists in agriculture, biology and environmental sciences...need [the] supplemental coverage [available in *CC/AB&ES*]."⁴

In *CC/Life Sciences* there is a section covering the core clinical journals which is found in *CC/Clinical Practice* as well. Thus, *CC/LS* is useful to many clinical people who are also involved in research. Unfortunately this solution is not possible for applied biology. But it would be possible to create a new section, consisting of all those applied biology journals not now covered by *CC/LS*, which could be substituted for the clinical section. *CC/Life Sciences* subscribers would have the option of receiving their edition with either

the clinical section or the new *AB&ES* section. I can't help thinking of the dilemma this solution would pose for those doing veterinary research. But this approach could eliminate much duplicate coverage.

Optimizing journal coverage is not an easy task. We are always under great pressure from publishers, editors, and readers to cover more. At the same time we must try to exert quality as well as financial control. But if you are dissatisfied with coverage or any other facet of an ISI service, complain.⁵ We can't satisfy everyone completely. But we do react to all constructive suggestions.

The viability of an ISI printed service depends upon our ability to sell it to a relatively large number of people. Hence, we are always looking for economical ways to improve our products' acceptance. Marketing strategy is designed to optimize not only producer profit, but also user benefit.

REFERENCES

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