

Sustainability of Scientific Journals in the Developing World With Special Reference to Bangladesh

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Sustainability of Scientific Journals in the Developing World With Special Reference to Bangladesh*

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Abstract

The study aimed to explore the sustainability issues of journal publication in Bangladesh. Forty-three journal editors were interviewed, and 66 current journals were scanned. Findings reveal that 68% of the journals were published late, 30% had inconsistencies in typesetting, and 14% were indexed. Most journals were found either excellent or of good quality in terms of printing (85%), binding (77%), paper (92%), and graphic reproduction (76%). Most journals were not available in major libraries. Of the 43 editors, 28 reported to have cost-recovery of 1-45% from subscription, advertisement, and sales. About 74.4% of the editors did not consider their journals at stake. Although 86% of the editors were confident that their journals would sustain in the long run, 37.3% could not cite any logic in support of their statement. Major problems include lack of finance and quality articles, skilled staff, institutional support; and lengthy peer review process. Only one claimed to be a full-time editor having training on editing and publication. Half (51%) of the editors reported to have training on editing, while four had publication training. Most editors (79%) showed keen interest in editing and publication training. Some suggestions are made to ensure sustainability of local journals.

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Definition

The word 'sustainability' has become a popular term in recent times, particularly in the developing countries as well as in the donor community. The dictionary meaning of the word 'sustainability' is something capable of being sustained in the long run. While looking at the sustainability of scientific journals, we tried to concentrate on the quality, scheduled publication, availability, management, and financial aspects. When a journal was found financially viable, had enough subscriptions or advertisement income, had enough flow of articles, published on time, and available in the libraries, it was considered sustainable. The editors' views and the physical verification of the journal helped arrive to such a conclusion.

Methodology

All the editors of the English language science journals published in Bangladesh were included in the study. The English language journals were selected since almost all the local journals are published in English. A total of 43 journal editors responded from Dhaka, Gazipur, Mymensingh, Rangpur, and Rajshahi. Data were collected through face-to-face interview of the editors, using a structured questionnaire. In some cases the editors filled in the questionnaires themselves at their convenient time. Eight major libraries of Dhaka city and another agricultural research library in Gazipur were visited to physically scan the currently available science journals published in Bangladesh (Table 1). These libraries were purposively selected with an assumption that all the published journals would be available, since these libraries cover all the academic and research disciplines.

Findings

About the editors

Of the 43 journal editors interviewed, 20 (46.5%) were the editors of bio-medical journals, followed by social science and agricultural science journals (Table 2). Among the journals they represented, 32 (74.4%) were half-yearly, followed by quarterly journals 5 (11.6%) (Table 3). About 63% of these journals are published by institutions, while 35% by associations or societies (Table 4). Only one claimed to be a full-time editor having training on editing and publication. Half (51%) of the editors reported to have training on editing, while four had training on publication. Most editors (79%) showed keen interest in editing and publication training.

Table 2. Distribution of journals according to their discipline.

| Discipline | No. of journals (%) |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Bio-medical sciences | 20 (46.51) |
| Social sciences | 11 (25.59) |
| Agricultural sciences | 6 (13.95) |
| Others | 6 (13.95) |
| Total | 43 (100) |

Table 3. Distribution of journals according to frequency of publication.

| Frequency of publications | No. of journals (%) |
|---------------------------|---------------------|
| Half-yearly | 32 (74.4) |
| Quarterly | 5 (11.6) |
| 3 per year | 3 (7) |
| Yearly | 3 (7) |
| Total | 43 (100) |

Table 4. Distribution of journal publishers.

| Type of publishers | No. of journals (%) |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Institutional | 27 (62.8) |
| Association/societies | 15 (34.9%) |
| Others | 1 (2.3%) |
| Total | 43 (100) |

Table 5. Readership of the journal.

| Degree of readership | No. of journals (%) |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Adequate within the country | 31 (72.1) |
| Poor | 6 (14.0) |
| Good | 3 (7.0) |
| Don't know | 2 (4.7) |
| No response | 1 (2.3) |
| Total | 43 (100) |

Major problems

Thirty (70%) editors cited various problems regarding their journals, and others did not respond to this question. Eight (18.6%) editors considered lack of adequate finance and skilled manpower as the major problem, while another 8 thought of lack of adequate finance only. Other major problems include lack of quality papers and lengthy peer review process. When asked to cite three major editorial problems, only 18 (42%) editors responded. Lack of real assistance in editing was cited most by the editors, followed by their own time constraints, delayed peer review, and lack of workforce. Inconsistencies in typesetting, and layout design was also observed during the physical verification of journals in the libraries.

Funding, cost-recovery and sustainability

More than 44% of the editors informed that they had enough funds for their journals, while 37% did not have enough funds (Table 6). About 35% reported that they had a cost-recovery ranging from 1-15% from sales, subscription and advertisement, while it was nearly 26% from subscription only. Another 23% and 14% had cost-recovery in the range of 16-30% from sales, subscription, and advertisement, and from only advertisement respectively (Table 7). Only one editor claimed full recovery from sales, subscription and advertisements.

Table 8. Sustainability of journals as viewed by editors.

| Responses of editors | <u>Sustainable at present</u> | <u>Sustainable in the long run</u> |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| | No. of journals (%) | No. of journals (%) |
| Will sustain | 32 (74.4) | 37 (86.0) |
| Will not sustain | 8 (18.6) | 4 (9.3) |
| May not sustain | 1 (2.3) | - |
| Don't know | - | 1 (2.3) |
| No response | 2 (4.7) | 1 (2.3) |
| Total | 43 (100) | 43 (100) |

Table 9. Means to make the journals sustainable in the long run.

| Responses of editors | No. of journals (%) |
|--|---------------------|
| Institutional support | 11 (25.6) |
| Enthusiasm and zeal of editors | 7 (16.3) |
| Need of standard journals | 5 (11.6) |
| Enough fund, flow of articles, and skilled manpower | 2 (4.7) |
| More care of the institution/society/editorial board members | 2 (4.7) |
| No response | 16 (37.3) |
| Total | 43 (100) |

About the journals

Availability

Sixty-six English language journals were available in nine major libraries in and around Dhaka City. The highest number (21) of current journals was found displayed in the library of the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute, followed by the BIRDEM library (14) (Table 1).

Regularity in publication

About 56% of the editors reported that their journals could not be published regularly (Table 10), while our physical verification at the libraries reveals that 68% of the journals had backlog in publication. Lack of funding as reported by the editors was the major cause of irregularity in publication (44%), followed by lengthy peer review process (22.2%) and lack of skilled workforce (18.5%) (Table 11). Here the workforce means editors and publication experts.

a subsidized sector, which does not always serve the purpose of wider dissemination. Many journals are published to serve the purpose of the institution or association, but not to serve the purpose of the readers or contributors. This kind of journals will sustain (continue to be published) as long as their institutional support continues. These journals may be published late, and may not be available in relevant libraries and to potential readers. The sustainability of other journals is at stake both from financial and qualitative points of view, as long as they need to depend on enough flow of quality articles and subscriptions, skilled editors, and vigorous marketing effort. Besides, all journals published from developing countries are facing an imbalance competition with the journals published from developed countries. This is a reality which will never be eliminated. But even than, journal publication from developing countries should be continued. Rather, we should try to improve the quality of our journals, disseminate widely, and earn revenues by overcoming the problems encountered.

To make the developing country journals economically viable the following suggestions are worth consideration:

- a. Efforts should be made to raise fund for journal publication by increasing the number of subscriptions, publishing advertisements, sale of reprints, and obtaining funds from the donor community;
- b. Publication schedule should be maintained strictly, and vigorous marketing and promotional efforts be undertaken;
- c. Planned and integrated efforts should be made to circulate the journals widely to reach the target audience;

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