

Consistency or Context? Reflections on Indexing, Evaluation, and Temporal Validity

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Preamble

In recent editorials, “*Rigor or Symmetry? Reflections on Fifteen Years of Diamond Open Access*” (<https://doi.org/10.33263/BRIAC161.001>) and “*Consistency or Contingency? Reflections on Uncertainty in Editorial Triage*” (<https://doi.org/10.33263/LIANBS151.001>), I have reflected on the structural asymmetries and contextual variability that may emerge within contemporary scholarly evaluation frameworks, arguing that the central issue is not rigor, but symmetry. The present reflection revisits this premise from a different angle, considering whether similar asymmetries emerge in the processes governing indexing and database inclusion.

In scholarly publishing, evaluation is often perceived as a definitive moment: a structured process through which a journal’s quality, practices, and scientific contribution are assessed against established criteria. The outcome - acceptance or rejection - is understood to reflect, at least provisionally, the journal’s position within a given evaluative framework.

Yet what happens when that same journal, having undergone evaluation and received a negative decision, is subsequently incorporated into the very database that declined it?

This question becomes more complex when the inclusion extends not only to content published after the decision, but also to the very archive that formed the basis of the original evaluation.

A Question of Consistency

If a journal is evaluated on the basis of its current issues, alongside a representative view of its recent and past publications, and is found not to meet the required threshold, the implication is that its content, structure, or practices fall below a defined standard. If, at a later stage, that same body of published work - including material previously subject to evaluation - is incorporated into the database, the implicit conclusion appears to differ.

What, then, has changed - if the content itself has not?

The scientific content remains identical. The articles are unchanged. The peer-review history is fixed in time. What may have evolved are the criteria, their interpretation, or the strategic priorities governing database expansion.

This raises a fundamental question: can the same body of work be simultaneously insufficient for evaluation and sufficient for inclusion?

Temporal Validity and Retroactive Recognition

The issue is further complicated when the temporal boundaries of indexing shift. Initial inclusion may begin from a defined year, suggesting a threshold of relevance or compliance.

Subsequent expansion to earlier volumes, however, introduces a form of retroactive validation. In some cases, this expansion may encompass precisely those periods that were previously subject to formal evaluation.

Notably, the subsequent indexing of the journal has come to include articles published during periods that had already been subject to formal evaluation and, at that time, did not lead to acceptance. The same body of work, therefore, appears to have been assessed under one set of conditions and later incorporated under another, without any intrinsic modification of its scientific content.

Articles that were not considered part of the indexed corpus at one moment become integrated into it at another.

Do these articles acquire value over time, or does their visibility simply align with evolving database architectures?

If indexing is understood as a proxy for recognition, then retrospective inclusion suggests that recognition itself may be temporally fluid.

Evaluation and Inclusion as Distinct Processes

A possible interpretation is that evaluation and indexing are governed by different logics. Evaluation operates as a gatekeeping mechanism, applying formalized and often stringent criteria. Indexing, particularly in phases of database expansion, may function as an aggregative process, incorporating content to enhance coverage and representativeness.

If so, the two processes - though related - are not equivalent.

However, the absence of clear demarcation between them can generate ambiguity. When rejection is followed by inclusion, the distinction between failing to meet standards and being outside the scope of a given moment becomes difficult to sustain.

Symmetry and Thresholds

This dynamic invites comparison with a broader structural pattern: the asymmetry between entry and presence. The threshold for acceptance is often explicit, documented, and procedurally rigorous. The threshold for inclusion, particularly when applied retrospectively or unilaterally, may be less transparent.

Are the criteria for entering a database identical to those governing its expansion?

If not, then inclusion may not necessarily confirm that the standards required for entry have been met. Instead, it may reflect a different set of priorities - temporal, strategic, or structural.

Authority and Control

Another dimension concerns agency. Indexing is frequently perceived as an external validation of quality. Yet when inclusion occurs without explicit consultation, it raises questions regarding the locus of control.

Is indexing a status conferred upon journals, or a condition determined by database infrastructures?

To what extent do journals participate in, or influence, the terms under which their content is integrated and represented?

Data Stability and Scholarly Record

The retroactive expansion of indexed archives also has implications for the stability of bibliometric data. Citation counts, visibility metrics, and evaluative frameworks rely on the assumption that the underlying dataset is relatively stable.

When coverage changes over time, the historical record is not merely revealed - it is, in part, reconfigured.

Does this process correct prior omissions, or does it introduce a shifting baseline against which scholarly impact is measured?

A Broader Reflection

The questions raised here are not directed at individual decisions, nor do they challenge the legitimacy of evolving standards. Scholarly communication must adapt to technological, methodological, and institutional developments.

However, when evaluation outcomes and indexing practices diverge in their treatment of the same content, a conceptual tension emerges.

Is scientific value a fixed attribute, assessed against stable criteria, or is it contingent upon the context in which it is examined?

If the latter, then evaluation does not merely measure quality - it situates it within a temporal and structural framework that may itself evolve.

In such a system, consistency becomes as important as rigor. Without it, the distinction between insufficient and sufficient risks becoming a matter not only of quality, but of timing.

And timing, unlike scientific content, is never subject to peer review.

Consistency as a Condition

Ultimately, the question is not whether standards should evolve, nor whether databases should expand. Both are necessary in a dynamic scholarly ecosystem. The question is whether the same scientific content can legitimately occupy different evaluative positions without any intrinsic transformation. If so, then what is being measured is not solely quality, but context. And if context determines outcomes as much as content, then consistency ceases to be a procedural detail - it becomes the very condition upon which the credibility of evaluation depends.