

Who Knows Before the Public Knows? Journal Metrics, Embargoes, and the Asymmetry of Access

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Preamble

In a series of recent editorials, I reflected on different forms of asymmetry within contemporary scholarly evaluation.

In “Rigor or Symmetry? Reflections on Fifteen Years of Diamond Open Access” <https://doi.org/10.33263/BRIAC161.001>, I considered how journals operating under non-commercial, Diamond Open Access models may face increasingly demanding technical and formal requirements, while journals incorporated under earlier evaluative frameworks may continue to benefit from historical positioning.

In “Consistency or Contingency? Reflections on Uncertainty in Editorial Triage” <https://doi.org/10.33263/LIANBS151.001>, I addressed the variability that may arise when comparable formal or technical conditions receive different levels of attention across related evaluation processes.

In “Consistency or Context? Reflections on Indexing, Evaluation, and Temporal Validity” <https://doi.org/10.33263/BRIAC162.070>, I examined the conceptual tension that emerges when the same scholarly content appears to occupy different evaluative positions depending on database architecture, indexing timing, or procedural context.

In “Broken Links, Broken Symmetry? Reflections on Technical Formalism and Evaluative Reciprocity” <https://doi.org/10.33263/BRIAC163.071>, I turned attention toward the evaluator’s own infrastructure, asking whether technical imperfections are interpreted with the same conceptual tolerance across different positions within the scholarly ecosystem.

In “Applied Chemistry or Applied Everything? Reflections on Scope, Citation, and Evaluative Coherence” <https://doi.org/10.33263/BRIAC163.100>, I revisited the question of scope, asking whether content relevance can be evaluated coherently when the operational map of a category is itself broad, interdisciplinary, and historically evolving.

In “Indexed, Ranked, Accused: Why Bibliometric Status Is Not a Certificate of Integrity in the Age of AI-Hallucinated Citations” <https://doi.org/10.33263/BRIAC164.101>, I considered the limits of bibliometric status as a proxy for scholarly integrity, particularly when fabricated or unverifiable references may enter indexed literature under the appearance of formal legitimacy.

The present reflection continues this discussion from another angle.

Not the criteria applied to journals.

Not the timing of indexing.

Not the technical infrastructure of evaluation.

But the timing of access to evaluative information itself.

More specifically, it considers what happens when journal-level bibliometric information appears to circulate before its official public release, under embargo, and asks what public policy governs such circulation.

The issue is not whether embargoed communication is inherently improper.

It may not be.

The issue is whether the rules governing such communication are transparent, uniformly applied, and compatible with the principle of evaluative neutrality.

The Communication

On 12 June 2026, I received a communication from a journal office referring to the forthcoming release of the Journal Citation Reports and indicating that a Journal Impact Factor value had already been made available in advance of the official public release. The communication stated that the information was provided under strict embargo until the official release on 17 June 2026 at 08:00 a.m. BST.

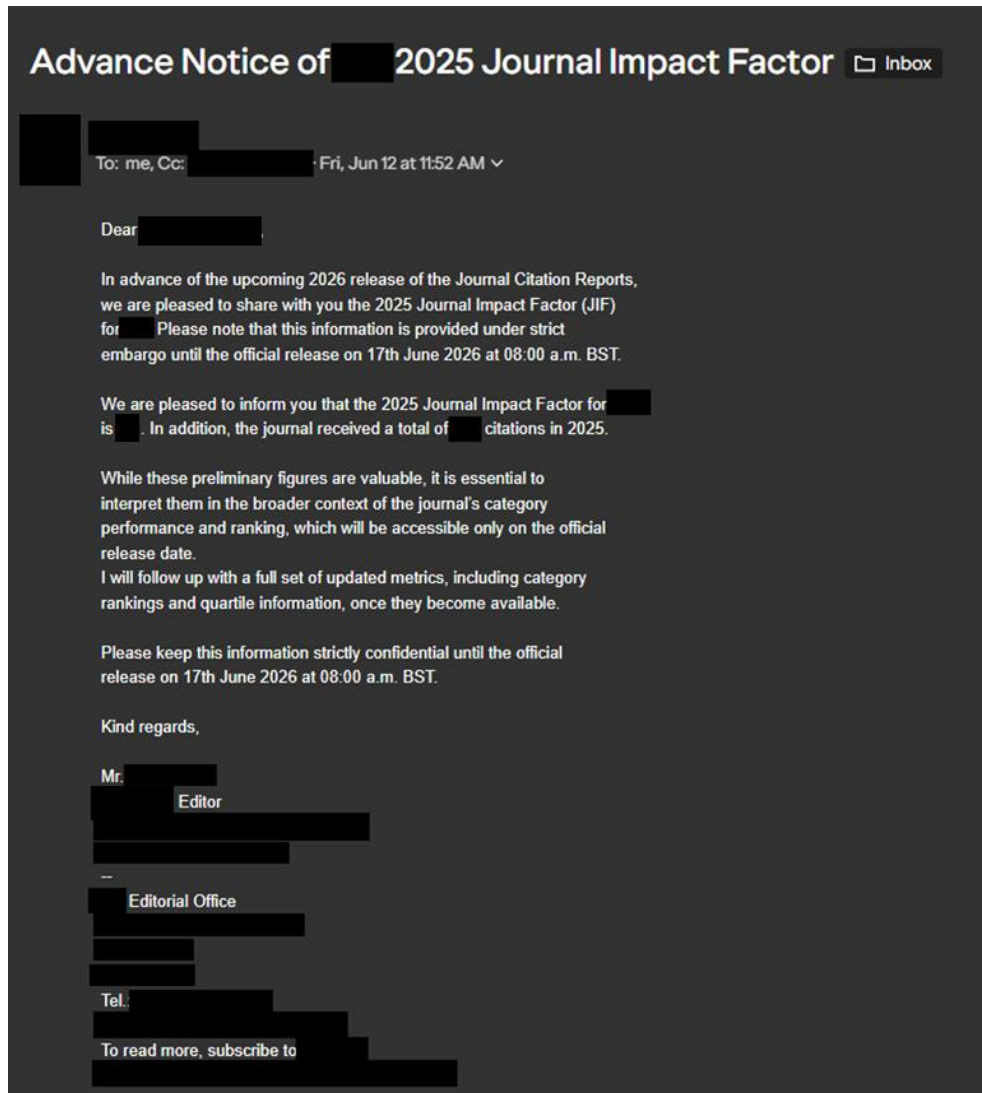


Figure 1. Pre-release communication indicating that forthcoming Journal Impact Factor information had been shared under embargo with editorial recipients before the official Journal Citation Reports release.

The journal name, sender identity, numerical metric, citation count, institutional details, and all other identifying information has been blurred. The purpose of referring to this communication is not to disclose confidential information, identify any journal, question any individual sender, or suggest improper conduct.

It is to document a procedural fact.

Five days before the stated official release date, a metric intended for public comparison had apparently become known, at least to certain actors, before it became publicly available to the scholarly community at large.

This observation may have a simple explanation.

It may reflect a standard pre-release communication process. It may be part of an organized embargo system. It may allow publishers to prepare internal documentation, public announcements, website updates, or communications with editors and stakeholders. It may be administratively efficient. It may be entirely legitimate.

Precisely for that reason, it deserves clarification.

Because legitimacy is strengthened, not weakened, by transparency.

The Public Date and the Private Date

There is an additional element that makes the question more relevant.

At the time of writing, I was unable to identify a publicly accessible Clarivate page confirming the exact release date and time stated in the embargoed communication. Public Clarivate materials refer generally to the annual release of the Journal Citation Reports, and public training pages announce sessions dedicated to the forthcoming edition after the expected release period. These public materials confirm the existence and relevance of the forthcoming edition, but they do not appear to make the exact embargo date and time equally visible to all users.

This does not prove impropriety.

It does not prove preferential treatment.

It does not prove that the communication was outside an authorized process.

But it does raise a simple question: if an exact release date, an exact release time, and specific pre-release metric information are available to some recipients before they are clearly visible to the wider scholarly community, what public policy explains that difference?

The distinction matters.

A general expectation of a late-June release is one thing.

An exact embargo deadline attached to a specific forthcoming metric is another.

The first is public anticipation.

The second is operational knowledge.

And operational knowledge can be used.

Embargo Is Not the Problem

Embargoes are not unusual in academic and scientific communication.

Scientific journals use embargoes for press releases. Funding agencies may prepare coordinated announcements. Research institutions may brief communications teams before public disclosure. Databases and ranking systems may prepare technical releases before public access begins.

The existence of embargoed information is therefore not, by itself, problematic.

Embargo can serve coordination.

Embargo can prevent premature misinterpretation.

Embargo can allow technical systems to synchronize.

Embargo can protect data from fragmented or inaccurate dissemination before an official release.

The problem begins elsewhere.

It begins when it is unclear who receives the embargoed information.

It begins when it is unclear whether all comparable actors receive it at the same time.

It begins when it is unclear what information is shared, under what conditions, and for what permitted purposes.

It begins when public metrics become privately known before they become publicly accessible, without a clearly visible policy explaining the scope and symmetry of such access.

The issue, therefore, is not embargo.

It is transparency of embargo.

Advance Notice and Advance Access

There is an important distinction to make.

Advance notice of a release date is not the same as advance access to metric data.

A calendar invitation, customer email, support response, or training announcement may simply help stakeholders prepare for a forthcoming release. Such communication, by itself, does not imply impropriety. Embargoes are also common in science communication, journalism, institutional announcements, and corporate reporting. Information may be shared in advance under clear conditions, especially when organizations need time to prepare accurate communication.

But journal metrics are not ordinary publicity material.

They influence reputations, submission behavior, institutional reporting, editorial strategies, and competition between publishers. In that context, even advance knowledge can matter. Knowing the precise release time allows some actors to prepare statements, coordinate announcements, brief editors, and position themselves before others have even confirmed when the information will become publicly available.

This distinction should therefore be made explicit.

If the communication concerns only the timing of the release, that should be clear.

If it includes preliminary or final metric values, that should also be clear.

If some stakeholders receive both timing information and metric data before the public release, while others receive neither, then the difference is no longer merely logistical. It becomes part of the informational architecture of scholarly evaluation.

Metrics and Timing

Bibliometric indicators do not merely describe journals.

They influence them.

A Journal Impact Factor may affect author decisions, editorial board recruitment, institutional perceptions, funding narratives, marketing language, indexing expectations, and reputational positioning. Even before it becomes publicly visible, the knowledge of a forthcoming metric may influence behavior.

A journal that knows its forthcoming indicator may prepare messaging.

A publisher that knows the values across a portfolio may coordinate announcements.
An editorial office that knows the direction of a metric may contact authors, reviewers, or board members with renewed confidence.
A competitor that does not know must wait.
This does not automatically imply wrongdoing.
But it does create an informational asymmetry.
And in evaluative systems, asymmetry matters.
If metrics function as public instruments of scholarly comparison, then timing becomes part of the metric environment. A value disclosed before release is not merely a number known early. It is a reputational resource available early.
Time, in such cases, is not neutral.
It becomes an advantage.

Selective Knowledge and Publisher-Neutrality

The Journal Citation Reports are widely understood as instruments of journal-level comparison. Their authority depends not only on calculation, but also on trust: trust that the underlying data are produced according to coherent methods, trust that journal indicators are comparable, and trust that access to evaluative information is governed by impartial principles.

If the metrics are publisher-neutral, one may reasonably ask whether pre-release access to those metrics is also publisher-neutral.

This is not a rhetorical accusation.

It is a procedural question.

Are all publishers whose journals receive Journal Impact Factors given access to the relevant values before the public release?

Are all journal offices treated in the same way?

Are large commercial portfolios and smaller independent journals included under equivalent pre-release conditions?

Are journals informed directly, or only publishers?

Are editors, editorial board members, authors, reviewers, or invited contributors permitted recipients?

Are rankings and quartiles governed by a different release logic from numerical indicators?

Is the exact release date and time public before it is communicated under embargo to selected recipients?

Is there a written policy accessible to the public?

If such a policy exists, its visibility would strengthen confidence in the process.

If such a policy does not exist, or is not easily accessible, then the absence itself becomes relevant.

Because in scholarly evaluation, the rules of access are part of the rules of evaluation.

The Asymmetry of Access

In previous reflections, I considered how the same technical imperfection may acquire different meaning depending on where it appears. A broken link in an applicant journal may become a signal of insufficient infrastructure; a broken link in an evaluator's platform may be understood as an administrative oversight.

A similar asymmetry may exist in relation to access.

For some actors, metric information may be available in advance.

For others, it becomes available only at the public moment of release.

For some journals, pre-release knowledge may allow preparation.

For others, the release arrives as an external event to be discovered, interpreted, and reacted to after the fact.

The difference may be only a few days.

But in reputational systems, even a few days can matter.

Academic publishing increasingly operates through anticipation. Calls for papers are timed. Special issues are planned. Editorial board invitations are framed. Marketing campaigns are scheduled. Website banners are prepared. Institutional news items are drafted. Social media announcements are synchronized.

Access before release is not passive.

It can be operationalized.

This does not mean it is misused.

It means that the conditions of access should be clear.

Embargoed Data and Public Trust

There is a delicate relationship between private preparation and public trust.

A database may need to communicate with publishers before a release for technical reasons. Publishers may need time to verify journal records, prepare pages, align metadata, or prevent confusion. These are reasonable administrative needs.

But public trust requires boundaries.

If embargoed data are shared, who may receive them?

If they are redistributed, how far may they travel?

If journal offices communicate them to external stakeholders, is that permitted?

If such communication is permitted, is it permitted equally across journals?

If it is not permitted, how is the embargo enforced?

The question is not whether one email, one journal, or one publisher acted appropriately.

The question is whether the scholarly community can understand the policy architecture within which such communication occurs.

Opacity invites suspicion even where no misconduct exists.

Transparency prevents suspicion before it becomes interpretation.

The Public Function of Private Metrics

Journal metrics occupy an ambiguous position.

They are produced by private or commercial infrastructures, but they perform public academic functions. Institutions use them. Researchers respond to them. Journals organize around them. Careers may be indirectly shaped by them. National evaluation systems may incorporate them. Libraries, funders, and universities may treat them as signals of prestige, relevance, or legitimacy.

This creates a special responsibility.

A metric may be proprietary in production, but public in consequence.

When private data products become public instruments of academic judgment, the process by which they are disclosed matters. The release date matters. The embargo policy matters. The recipients matter. The possibility of selective advantage matters.

Again, the point is not to deny the value of metrics.

The point is to ask whether metric governance is sufficiently transparent for the role metrics now play.

Because when metrics become part of evaluation, their circulation becomes part of evaluation too.

Questions for Clarivate

The present reflection therefore leads to several questions that may deserve direct clarification from Clarivate.

Does Clarivate provide publishers or journal offices with access to Journal Impact Factor values before the official public release of the Journal Citation Reports?

If so, is such access provided uniformly to all eligible publishers and journals, or only under specific contractual, technical, portfolio-based, or institutional conditions?

Are publishers permitted to redistribute embargoed metric information to journal editors, editorial board members, authors, reviewers, or other external collaborators before the public release?

Is there a public distinction between advance notice of the JCR release date and advance access to JCR metric data?

Does Clarivate publish, or intend to publish, the exact JCR release date and time in advance for all stakeholders?

If exact release timing and metric information are communicated before public release, are all publishers, journals, institutions, and relevant stakeholders informed through the same official channels?

If not, what criteria determine who receives such information first?

Is there a public policy governing embargoed access, confidentiality obligations, permitted recipients, and permitted uses?

How does Clarivate ensure that pre-release access does not generate selective informational advantages within scholarly publishing?

These questions are not hostile.

They are necessary.

They arise because transparency is not only a virtue for journals being evaluated. It is also a virtue for the systems that produce evaluative authority.

From Release Date to Release Equity

A release date marks the moment when information becomes publicly available.

But release equity concerns something deeper.

It concerns whether access before that moment is governed by rules that are visible, consistent, and fair.

If all relevant actors receive the same embargoed information at the same time under the same conditions, then the policy can be explained.

If only some actors receive it, then the criteria for selection should be explained.

If redistribution is permitted, then the limits of redistribution should be explained.

If redistribution is not permitted, then embargoed communications should not circulate beyond authorized recipients.

If different types of information are released at different stages, the distinction should be made clear.

If the public can know only an approximate release period, while selected recipients know the exact release time and specific forthcoming values, that difference should also be explained.

Without such clarity, the public release may remain formally simultaneous, while practical awareness is not.

And when practical awareness differs, the scholarly field is not operating under equal informational conditions.

The issue, therefore, is not simply when the public knows.

It is who knows before the public knows.

And why.

The Burden of Clarity

In contemporary scholarly publishing, journals are expected to maintain transparency across multiple dimensions: editorial policies, peer-review procedures, ethical guidelines, ownership, contact information, author charges, access conditions, correction policies, and digital infrastructure.

These expectations are legitimate.

But transparency should not be directional only.

If journals must disclose their procedures, evaluative infrastructures should also disclose theirs.

If journals are expected to clarify conflicts, criteria, responsibilities, and processes, metric-producing systems should clarify the rules governing access to metric information.

If journals are evaluated on the visibility and reliability of their public documentation, the same principle should apply, proportionately, to systems whose indicators influence journal reputation.

This is not a request for lower standards.

It is a request for symmetrical standards.

Conclusion

An embargoed metric is a small thing.

But small things can reveal large structures.

A number known before its public release may seem administratively ordinary. It may be part of a routine communication process. It may reflect legitimate preparation rather than preferential treatment. It may be governed by policies that are internally clear and responsibly applied.

But if those policies are not publicly visible, the scholarly community is left to infer the rules from fragments.

Inference is not transparency.

Transparency should not begin only when the numbers are released. It should begin with the process that determines who knows, when they know, and under what conditions they are allowed to know before others.

A general public expectation of a late-June release is not the same as an exact private embargo deadline.

A public webinar after the release is not the same as pre-release access to specific metrics before the release.

A public metric is not fully public if its practical use begins privately.

And in an ecosystem already shaped by metrics, rankings, thresholds, and reputational signals, the timing of information cannot be treated as irrelevant.

The question is not whether Journal Impact Factor values should exist.

They do.

The question is not whether Journal Citation Reports should have an organized release process.

They should.

The question is not whether embargoed communication may ever be legitimate.

It may be.

The question is whether pre-release access to evaluative metrics is governed by a clear, public, uniform, and accountable policy.

Because when metrics become instruments of comparison, their circulation becomes part of the comparison.

When indicators influence reputation, early knowledge of indicators becomes reputationally meaningful.

When evaluation depends on trust, timing becomes a component of fairness.

The issue, once again, is not rigor.

It is symmetry.

And where some know before others know, symmetry depends on whether the rules explaining that difference are visible to all.