

## The Indian ISSN conundrum

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The International Standards Serial Number (ISSN), the unique identifier for serials or periodicals, is similar to the ISBN for books and monographs, and DOI for online documents. The ISSN International Centre in Paris governs the ISSN activities through a network of national libraries or national institutions in 89 countries.

In India, the National Science Library at the CSIR-National Institute of Science Communication and Information Resources (NISCAIR) is the ISSN National Centre. In the last few years, the Indian National Centre has been flooded with requests for more ISSNs than it can actually handle. Figure 1 gives the growth in the number of ISSNs assigned ever since the centre came into being in 1986. A steep growth in the ISSNs can be seen in the last few years.

One of the reasons for the phenomenal increase in the number of journals seeking ISSNs is because of UGC's 'minimum qualifications for appointments of teachers and other academic staff in universities and colleges and measures for the maintenance of standards in higher education 2010' wherein Academic Performance Indicators (API) for tenure promotions for teachers working in universities and colleges give points for articles published in ISSN journals<sup>1,2</sup>. This has been articulated in a white paper prepared by the ISSN National Centre in 2012 (ref. 3). Further by 2010, buoyed by the success of open access journals such as *PLoS ONE*, hundreds of APC (article processing charge)-based open access journals have mushroomed. Coincidentally, UGC's API came as a godsend to those individuals and publishers in India who were already toying with the idea of APC-based open access journals. With points to be scored for publishing papers, reams of 'research' papers continue to be produced that make way into the many new and soon-to-be launched APC-based journals. Many publishers who evidently know nothing about journals continue to literally capitalize on the opportunity, by charging as low as Rs 1000 for publishing an article. In sheer desperation for API scores and driven by other academic compulsions,

unsuspecting authors continue to fall prey to such journals<sup>3,4</sup>.

The level of ignorance of some nouveau publishers can be gauged by the fact that immediately after obtaining ISSN for a new journal, they also want an impact factor! There have been numerous instances where basic plagiarism check of articles in the proposed first issues of journals failed. We also encounter journals with fictitious editorial board members and bizarre journal titles.

The UGC API unwittingly indicating ISSN as a 'quality' criterion not only attracted callous and opportunistic publishers but also a few researchers and faculty members who have found it easier to bring out an 'international journal' rather than publishing articles in already well-established journals.

The pertinent question that easily arises is why are ISSNs being assigned to such questionable journals?

According to the ISSN inclusion criteria laid down by the ISSN International Centre, Paris all that are required for inclusion of a serial in the ISSN Registry are: there should be content related to a subject, there should be editorial responsibility, a consistent title and a valid URL. Actually, these are the only criteria required to 'uniquely identify a serial', which in any case is the essence of ISSN.

The point is, ISSN is not an indicator of quality.

However, in its endeavour to keep questionable journals at bay, the Indian ISSN Centre has been taking some steps such as carrying out plagiarism checks which clearly is outside the scope of the prescribed ISSN inclusion criteria. Plagiarism and other quality checks of journal articles are editorial and publisher responsibilities.

Unfortunately, the desperation for ISSNs is such that if an ISSN application is turned down for valid shortcomings whatsoever, the editor or publisher reapplies after 'taking care' of the shortcomings and are persistent till such time the ISSN is obtained. Quite a few times, non-assignment of ISSNs on legitimate grounds has been countered with not so polite responses including complaints to the ISSN International Centre and higher offices in the government machinery.

Now after an ISSN is assigned, the Centre has little control over what is published in the journal. The ISSN National Centre is not a regulatory or monitoring authority of scholarly journals. As per ISSN guidelines, the Centre can suppress an ISSN only if it subsequently comes to light that misleading information has been provided by a publisher at the time of applying for ISSN. The

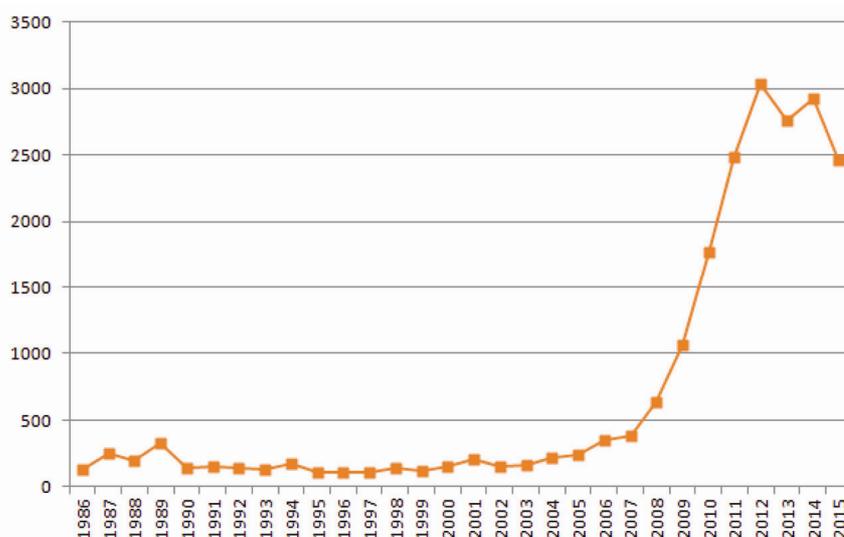


Figure 1. Growth in Indian ISSNs.

Centre does receive emails complaining about plagiarized articles published in a journal which we duly forward to editor or publisher of the journal.

The unenviable situation of the ISSN Indian National Centre in handling questionable journals has been exhaustively documented in the white paper and shared with the authorities including the ISSN International Centre, Paris<sup>3</sup>. The International Centre recognizes the issues plaguing the Indian Centre and has stood with the Centre's decision of not assigning ISSNs to many journals.

In recent months, the National Centre has made it mandatory for the print serials applying for ISSN to first register the serial with the Registrar of Newspapers in India (RNI). The Office of RNI coordinates with the licensing wing of the police department to verify the identity of the publishers. This step assures that the publisher's address given at the time of applying is verified through the RNI process. Further, plagiarism check of randomly picked articles is being carried out and in the event of plagiarism being detected, ISSN is denied. The Centre

now also insists that complete addresses of editorial board members are to be given. Owing to these measures put in place, there has been some check on the number of ISSNs assigned. In 2014, 2015 and 2016, the numbers of ISSNs assigned are 2928, 2464 and 1100 (approx.) respectively.

While print-ISSNs are relatively easier to handle, it is the e-ISSN requests for online journals that are difficult to manage. An online journal can be easily launched with just a computer and internet connection. There have been instances of online journal websites disappearing or vital details such as title and publisher address on websites being changed after the online journal has procedurally received the e-ISSN. With online content being amenable to changes, it is extremely difficult to monitor the e-journals. It comes as no surprise that many Indian journals appear on the Beall's list of predatory journals<sup>5</sup>.

The University Grants Commission is also aware of the situation and it will be in the interest of academic and research fraternity that ISSN is removed from the

API criteria. The problem does not seem to be just with journals. With points to be scored for organizing and attending conferences, seminars, workshops and so on, it looks like the numbers of such events have also spiralled over the years.

1. Raju, N. V., *Curr. Sci.*, 2013, **104**(11), 1461–1462.
2. <http://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/fake-journals-make-in-india-gone-wrong/article-7800231.ece>
3. Viji, S. and Lakshmi, V. V., International Standard Serial Number, White Paper, Indian ISSN National Centre, CSIR-NISCAIR, 2012.
4. Lakhota, S. C., *Curr. Sci.*, 2015, **108**(8), 1407–1408.
5. Lakhota, S. C., *Curr. Sci.*, 2013, **105**(3), 287–288.

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