



Reflections on ISTL

ISTL is Still Exceptional, in More Ways Than One

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So, it's been twenty-five years (or thirty, depending on how you count) since *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship* got started. ISTL grew out of a Science and Technology Section email newsletter that had started in 1991. It was upgraded to a journal in its own right in 1996, and hosted from the beginning by the University of California Santa Barbara library. I joined the editorial board in 2000, at the urging of my good friend and colleague Andrea Duda, our founding editor.

I wasn't present at the launch, so I can't say how much the concept of — and advocacy for — Open Access (OA) figured in the original decision to start an STS journal. OA was then in its infancy, and it's satisfying to know that ISTL was, intentionally or not, in the vanguard as an early example of platinum (a.k.a. diamond) open access, where all costs are subsidized by the publisher or host, and volunteer editors do all the work.

Sadly, journals like ours are still the exception rather than the norm. Librarians are generally enthusiastic promoters of Open in other disciplines, but the truth is that OA outlets are still few and far between in our own peer-reviewed literature. Since librarians are almost never going to be able to pay the thousands of dollars in APC fees charged by Gold journals (never mind the double-dipping hybrid journals), we end up publishing most of our own work behind old-fashioned paywalls.

Yet with ISTL we do have a choice. How ironic it is to see so many articles *about* Open Access in the wider world, written by librarians who reflexively cheer on the Open movement and admonish scientists and publishers to be more open, appearing in *closed* library journals! Is this a “do as I say not as I do” form of hypocrisy, or just a reflection of the market we live in? (Of course, many librarians also embrace Green OA and place their manuscripts in institutional repositories, but that’s not quite the same thing.)

Clarivate’s Journal Citation Reports (JCR) allows us to get a sense of what the library journal landscape looks like today. The latest ranking list for the “Information Science & Library Science” category is a curious blend of titles. The disciplines of Information Science and Library Science have always been conflated in many ways, and while they’re only tangentially related, it’s clear that the former has long since overwhelmed the latter in the sphere of our professional education system. This is no less true of their respective journal literatures. I somewhat subjectively coded all the titles in the list as being primarily either about “Information Science” or “Libraries”, with a couple of outliers in the “Publishing/ScholComm” area. Ranking the 86 titles by total citations received, my finger has to move down to the 29th spot before it lands on the first true library journal: *Journal of Academic Librarianship*. Now an Elsevier title, JAL garnered 1,990 citations in 2020, according to Web of Science. Its Impact Factor places it only in the third quartile of the overall list, and its citation total is dwarfed by that of the top title, *MIS Quarterly*, which received almost 27,000 citations that year. Further, the 86 titles in the JCR category collectively received 241,516 citations in 2020; the 28 library titles in that group accounted for only seven percent of the total.

Openness is not a characteristic of this literature. Of the 86 titles, only seven are fully open access, and out of these just three are English-language library publications: *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, *College & Research Libraries*, and *Information Technology and Libraries*. Now that Clarivate tracks OA status at the article level, JCR reports the percentage of open articles for each title. Only 16 percent of 2020 articles in the library journals are open, which at least slightly beats out information science with 12 percent.

This sobering picture is partly due to Clarivate’s known bias toward established commercial and major-publisher journals, which are almost entirely subscription-based. A number of library journals of good repute, including ISTL, don’t make it onto the list at all. This is reflective of the barriers OA journals face in attracting submissions, getting indexed and becoming widely read, which in turn leads to more submissions. More to the point, it’s clear that the library journal literature in general can’t become significantly more open until we move away from the author-pays business model. Yet somebody has to pay the bills, because the all-volunteer cost-subsidized model such as ALA/STS enables doesn’t scale well ([Harrington, 2017](#)).

In 2019, ISTL finally migrated to an Open Journals publishing platform. This was a long overdue change, but it has enabled ISTL to take on a more streamlined, modern appearance. (Many kudos are due to the board members who made this happen and did all the truly hard work of setting up the new site and moving the recent archive from the old UCSB site: especially Michael Fosmire, Andrea Duda, David Hubbard, Ed Eckel, and Ian McCullough.)

I should stress that while a new platform has altered some of the internal workflows, the basic editorial work behind putting out a quality journal continues unchanged. Almost every manuscript I encountered as an editor required a substantial amount of revision, reorganization and copy editing. This is not a knock on the quality of submissions — many were excellent from the start. But it does take considerable work to revise and edit a draft for final publication. The thankless work of our peer reviewers should not be overlooked either: their careful, constructive commentary is the first step along the path to a finished product worth reading.

When I finally decided to step away from the board I was confident that ISTL had a bright future and that I was leaving my part in very capable — and younger — hands. Participating in the scholarly communication process of our profession is a very important yet often overlooked role of the practicing academic librarian, and I sincerely hope that others will seize this opportunity when it arises. You can answer our occasional calls for new peer reviewers, or apply for vacancies on the editorial board. Seeing how the sausage is made can be very enlightening, and it will make you a better author as well.

Everyone in the library field has a stake in a professional literature that is free to publish in and free to read. As the above JCR analysis shows, we have a long way to go. I'm proud to have spent two decades on the ISTL team working toward this goal.

References

Harrington, R. (2017, June 1). Diamond open access, societies and mission. *The Scholarly Kitchen*. <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2017/06/01/diamond-open-access-societies-mission/>



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