

CHAPTER 2

WHAT AND WHEN TO PUBLISH

When to Publish-The Critical Importance of Being First

One of the more important factors to consider when publishing a primary peer-reviewed publication (or original report) is that the authors who publish the first written disclosure of new knowledge generally receive the primary credit for that new knowledge. Subsequent publications that communicate this information typically only receive credit for the confirmatory findings. The concept of being first can be traced back to Henry Oldenburg and the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. It has been reported that much of Oldenburg's motivation to establish this journal was to help resolve disputes among scientists of his day, as to who should receive credit for being the first to discover new information. By providing a written document disclosing a scientist's findings, the issue of being first could usually be resolved relatively easily. Importantly, this concept of being first has retained its importance in modern times, and should be a relevant factor in deciding when to disclose new knowledge generated as the result of original inquiry.

There are multiple arguments that can be made in favor of being the first to publish new knowledge. Primary among those reasons is, at least in concept, the intrinsic desire of an author to share the results of their research with the scientific community in order to advance the field. The more rapidly that new knowledge is communicated to the appropriate intellectual community, the more rapidly the field advances, presumably to the benefit of society as a whole. There should be little argument that, since most scientific endeavors are, at least in part, supported by the public sector, dissemination of new information to benefit society must always be at the forefront of publication decisions.

While this truly altruistic motivation for publishing is certainly laudable, the reality is that the vast majority of authors want to publish first in order to receive appropriate intellectual credit for the new discovery. The reader should be assured that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this type of motivation. In this latter respect, it is generally recognized that being the first to disclose new information in a primary peer-reviewed manuscript is critical to any author's professional career (provided of course, that an author is absolutely convinced of the scientific validity of the findings being reported). This is reflected through recognition by peers as to the relevance and importance of the contribution, manifested by increased citations and stature in the field. This, in turn, translates into benefits traditionally associated with an investigator's professional career, including invitations to present at professional meetings and symposia, and increased ability to garner grant support, thereby improving chances for academic promotion, professional mobility, and greater compensation.

The Hazards of Being First

On the other hand, although not as intrinsically obvious, there are some well-recognized disadvantages to being the first to publish new knowledge. Perhaps the most important of these disadvantages is the