

# Reprint Request Analysis in Documentation (Concerning the Paper by W. I. B. Onuigbo)

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*The author considers the fundamental possibilities provided by reprint request analysis for direct measurement of article use and indirect determination of their value, as compared to citation studies. The comparison of the two approaches takes into account such characteristics as completeness, accuracy, and speed. The possibility is revealed for applying reprint request documentation to evaluate the productivity of collections of papers, as well.*

The publication in IFID of W. I. B. Onuigbo's article [1] is hardly accidental. The documentation of reprint requests can, in fact, be a quite useful methodical tool for various research in information science, library science and scientometrics, but recently it has been applied less and less frequently. This fact, together with the growing popularity of bibliographic citation counts, is probably the reason for the appearance of this article.

W. I. B. Onuigbo not only draws the readers' attention to the importance of this tool, but also shows that it might be used for solving some problems that have never been approached in this way before. So, for the first time, the documentation of reprint requests is applied to characterise those who request the documents, rather than their authors. The correlation between the citation rates of certain scientific papers and their authors' activity in requesting reprints, as revealed by Onuigbo, is very important and confirms the considerable possibilities of such a tool in scientometrics. The author's approach to the study of secondary publication use, in order to find out which articles are needed, is rather interesting, namely, he does not determine the number of requests resulting from the study of a certain secondary source (as usually); on the contrary, he identifies secondary information sources on the basis of request analysis. Finally, the attempt to apply request documentation for studying the geographic distribution of scientific research is of interest.

While sharing the author's conclusion that 'reprint requests should not be discarded disdainfully, but documented gainfully', it seems worthwhile, however, to complete his conclusions with some fundamental statements that might be useful for those who follow him. These deal with the possible characteristics of reprint request documentation as a methodical research tool.

W. I. B. Onuigbo does not examine such characteristics in his article, nor does he discuss the differences between the fundamental possibilities of reprint request analysis and citation analysis for studying scientific communications. I think such a discussion would be justified, and it would be expedient to reveal some specifics of this tool compared with the basic possibilities of citation analysis, as these two approaches are usually applied in sol-

ving the same problems, directly characterising the use of a requested or cited document. Yet the basic possibilities of citation analyses are much better known.

For this reason, it should be stressed that, if the citing of a certain article testifies only to its actual use in a specific scientific work [2-4], reprint requests may be interpreted in one more way—the article may be used merely for information purposes, allowing a scientist to keep abreast of the most recent achievements [5]. From this point of view, the second approach is considered to provide more complete data [5].

These data are less exact, however. The point is that a researcher cites a paper as many times as he uses it when writing his own papers (at least, till the information contained in it becomes common knowledge and sometimes even then [6]); yet, as a rule, he requests a reprint only once, and then consults its content repeatedly. Besides, and this is even more important, while the references reflect the actual use of some scientific papers, reprint requests testify only to potential use, an intention on the part of a researcher to familiarise himself with a given paper. Requested sources are often merely looked through and then discarded as useless. Before a paper is actually used, requests indicate its use less exactly but more speedily than references.

It is common knowledge that citation analysis is frequently used to measure indirectly the value of a scientific paper. Moreover, a correlation has been found between the citation frequency for a certain population of papers and the measure of social recognition of their authors [7, 8]. This seems natural, since the value of a scientific paper can only be determined while it is used [9, p. 167]. To what extent is it possible to measure the article's value proceeding from the number of reprint requests?

It is clear that reprint request documentation, reflecting, to a minor degree, only supposed use, constitutes a less reliable indicator of value than citation analysis. On the other hand, reprint request documentation covering articles from a given journal (or any other collection of articles, for example, collected works by a certain author) can, in contrast to citation analysis, characterise the productivity (share of relevant documents) of a journal or other collection of documentary sources sim-

ply because the reprint request is usually made only once, in contrast to repeated (or zero) citation.

All this may be supplemented by two particular remarks. W. I. B. Onuigbo studied reprint requests received personally. A data sample would undoubtedly be more representative if it resulted from reprint request documentation received by a group of researchers investigating the same subject.

Finally, a personal demand by a colleague for an article reprint does not necessarily presuppose that it is of great interest. If a given paper is of particular interest to the reader, he may even prefer the exhausting work of copying it manually in a library to the long wait for a reprint—especially if the author lives in another hemisphere.

## REFERENCES

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