

Description

A recent large-scale analysis found that only about 3.9% of Web of Science–indexed publications (2010–2019) were cited at least once in policy documents, underscoring how selective the pathway from research to public policy is.

This article examines how publishing in journals with high *impact factors* and high prestige affects the research agenda across fields, the mechanisms by which high?profile outlets shape public discourse and policy uptake, and practical steps researchers and administrators can take to align scholarly goals with societal influence. The following sections outline what the *Journal Impact Factor (JIF)* does and does not do, when and why JIFs shape agendas, how policy uptake actually occurs, and actionable tips for maximizing societal reach without sacrificing scientific rigor.

What the Journal Impact Factor measures and why it matters

The *impact factor* is a journal-level citation metric that reports the average citations to a journal's articles over a defined recent window. As a shorthand for prestige and visibility, the JIF influences hiring, promotion, and funding decisions in many institutions and disciplines. However, scholarly critiques and policy groups have long cautioned against using JIF as a proxy for the quality of individual articles or researchers. The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (*DORA*) and its ongoing guidance work aim to reduce reliance on journal metrics in evaluation processes.

How high?impact journals influence the research agenda

High?impact journals affect research agendas through multiple, reinforcing channels. First, journals with large readerships and media outreach produce greater visibility for certain topics; researchers and funders respond to that visibility by prioritizing related questions and methods. Generalist, high?JIF outlets (for example, widely read multidisciplinary journals) can promote cross?disciplinary attention to a topic, accelerating resource flows and new collaborations. Conversely, specialized journals steer concentrated, field?specific developments where cumulative incremental advances matter more. Practical choices by researchers whether to target broad or specialist outlets therefore shape both short?term attention and long?term agenda setting.

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When prestige translates into public discourse and policy

Prestige alone does not guarantee policy influence. Recent empirical work shows that policy uptake depends on a mix of factors beyond journal prestige: news and blog coverage, social media engagement, open dissemination practices, authorship composition (including non?academic collaborators), and the explicit policy relevance of the findings. One large study using Overton and Altmetric data concluded that media mentions and communication channels had a stronger association with policy citations than academic citations alone; open access status and active dissemination increased the probability of being cited in policy, while paywalled articles were less likely to be policy?cited. Another analysis found policy citations are concentrated in specific fields (social sciences, life/earth sciences, health), and that only a small minority of papers ever appear in policy documents. These results indicate that visibility strategies and topic relevance often matter more for policy uptake than JIF per se.

How high?impact journals shape public discourse beyond citations

High?profile journals often employ press offices, embargoed releases and media relationships that amplify select studies to journalists and the public. This process can rapidly translate scientific findings into headlines, framing public understanding and shaping the policy conversation. At times, this amplification elevates methodological or interpretive issues into public debate for instance, ethics and bias topics in AI drawing outsized attention in policy fora even when academic citation counts are modest. Studies on disciplinary differences in internal vs external impacts show that some research topics (e.g., ethics, societal risk) are disproportionately influential in policy and media despite lower academic citation rates, highlighting how agenda?setting operates through thematic relevance and communicative reach.

Potential problems and unintended consequences

When institutions and funders privilege JIFs for evaluation, several distortions can occur. Researchers may tailor projects toward topics or formats likely to land in high?JIF journals (novelty over reproducibility), preferentially pursue certain methods, or avoid regional and methodological diversity that yields lower citation metrics. Overemphasis on JIFs can disincentivize long?term, locally contextual research that better serves policy needs. Moreover, reliance on journal metrics does not reliably predict policy uptake: quantitative analyses of SDG?related research show only modest relationships between bibliometric indicators and policy citations, suggesting that non?academic factors and communication strategies are often decisive.

How to design research with both scholarly and policy influence in mind

Researchers and research leaders can pursue a balanced strategy that acknowledges the attention benefits of high?impact venues while actively supporting policy translation. Key approaches include:

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- Align research questions with clear policy or practice implications and identify relevant stakeholder audiences early in project design.
- Use preprints, open data, and accessible summaries to accelerate discoverability and uptake, especially where time?sensitive policy windows exist.
- Cultivate media engagement and policy briefs: collaborate with institutional communications offices, prepare concise policy summaries, and share findings through targeted channels.
- Build interdisciplinary and practitioner collaborations; non?academic co?authors and cross?disciplinary teams tend to increase the likelihood of policy citations.
- Choose target journals deliberately: match audience and scope rather than chasing JIF alone; specialist journals can provide deeper traction within policymaking communities for field?specific agendas.

Practical checklist for researchers and administrators

- Clarify the intended research impact (academic, policy, practice, public) before submission.
- Map likely policy audiences and their timeframes; draft a short policy brief at manuscript submission.
- Select journals based on scope, audience and dissemination pathways, not just JIF.
- Prepare lay summaries, press?ready materials, and data access statements.
- Track mentions using Altmetric/Overton to evaluate reach toward policy documents and adjust dissemination strategy accordingly.

Examples and short case notes

- A field?level analysis of NLP research shows that while some topics (language modelling) drive high academic citations, topics addressing societal risks and fairness receive disproportionate attention in policy and media, even when academic citation counts are lower. This illustrates discipline?specific divergence between scholarly and societal impact channels. (arxiv.org)
- Large cross?disciplinary studies using Overton/Altmetric indicate that media visibility and open dissemination are strong predictors of policy citations, reinforcing the practical need for communication strategies that go beyond placement in high?JIF outlets.

How this affects institutional policy (what administrators should note)

University leaders and research office staff should reassess evaluation rubrics and promotion criteria to reward diverse forms of impact. DORA’s evolving guidance and institutional uptake provide models for responsible assessment that de-emphasize raw JIFs and adopt portfolio?based evaluation of research quality, openness, and societal contribution. Administrators can also invest in capacity for knowledge translation communications teams, policy liaison roles, and training for researchers on public engagement to help research convert visibility into measurable policy influence.

Conclusion and recommended next steps

Publishing in high?impact journals can accelerate visibility and can sometimes help set field agendas,

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but it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for policy influence. Policy uptake typically depends on topic relevance, targeted dissemination, open access practices, and effective translation for non?academic audiences. Researchers should plan impact pathways as part of their research design and consider a mixed publication strategy that balances prestige with audience fit.

For researchers seeking hands?on support with journal targeting and manuscript clarity, Enago's Research Impact Services can broaden your audiences and widen the impact of your research with professional multimedia production and effective promotional strategy.

Category

1. Reporting Research

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