

# All in the Same Boat: Consolidating Established Journals

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For many journal portfolios, the focus is on ever-increasing expansion, launching new journals to reach new markets, and capturing niche audiences. But what happens when those niche journals cannibalize each other and fight for prominence—when one journal emerges as the de facto flagship journal, and your research community begins to see the others as second string? As Sr Editorial Operations Manager, this was the main problem I faced at the Society of Petroleum Engineers (SPE) and, rather than fight against this trend, I proposed merging our 4 journals into one robust title that covers all aspects of petroleum engineering. One year later, the results are promising: Submissions to the new, consolidated journal are up 20% compared with total submissions for the previous journal portfolio. I believe this new journal will allow SPE to remain competitive within our field of research and offer new opportunities for research in a rapidly changing industry.

## How Did We Get Here?

In the early years of the Society (60–70 years ago), SPE had only one research journal. As that journal grew, it made logical sense to offer new, individualized journals that covered specific disciplines within petroleum engineering. At its height, SPE had 9 journals that were published simultaneously. In the 1990s and 2000s, interest and submissions to some of those journals dwindled, and they had to be sunset; many authors and readers were lost. In early 2022, the situation was not much better. SPE's general interest journal, *SPE Journal* (focused on fundamental research), was expanding rapidly due to a high impact factor and great reputation among the research community

for speed and quality. Meanwhile, SPE's 3 discipline-specific journals (focused on field applications) were losing steam. There was a nearly direct-numbers migration from these journals to *SPE Journal* (Figure 1).

SPE's editors anecdotally shared the same concerns about authors increasingly selecting *SPE Journal* as their first choice and not being willing to transfer to our other journals. SPE needed a solution that built on the growing strength of *SPE Journal* but was inclusive of the research communities that had been created in its specialized journals.

## The Pitch

Full disclosure, my first discussion with the editors on consolidating the journals did not go well. My goal was to assess interest, but I was nearly chased out of the virtual board meeting. I expected torch and pitchfork emojis to rain down on me. The specialized journal editors felt that the unique voice of each journal would get lost in a consolidation. On the flip side, the *SPE Journal* editors did not want to allow "riffraff" into their esteemed journal. Many felt personally attacked, as if SPE was flippantly dismissing all their hard work in the research community. I left the meeting a bit wounded, but with a clear direction.

What I needed for my room full of engineers was solid data. I gathered statistics (such as in Figure 1) that showed the trends in our journal portfolio. I also came up with a journal structure that would maintain the unique qualities of our past journals:

- Articles would be labeled as either "Fundamental Research" or "Applications" to capture the historic focus of our journal portfolio.
- The journal would be a collection of robust sections. Each journal to be sunset would have one or more dedicated sections in the new journal. The executive editors and associate editors for those journals would seamlessly transfer over to the new journal under their respective sections.
- The sections would even allow SPE to solve another problem—emerging research topics that had not grown enough to warrant a new journal could have their own

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<https://doi.org/10.36591/SE-4704-07>

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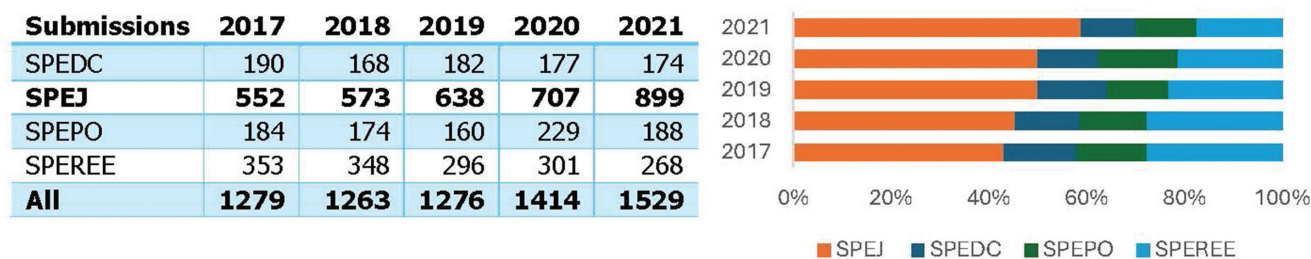


Figure 1. Submissions from 2017–2021 for Society of Petroleum Engineers' (SPE's) journal portfolio. The right chart shows each journal's submissions as a percentage of total submissions. Submissions increased greatly in 2020 and 2021 almost entirely due to *SPE Journal* (SPEJ). Abbreviations: SPEDC, *SPE Drilling & Completion*; SPEPO, *SPE Production & Operations*; SPEREE, *SPE Reservoir Evaluation & Engineering*.

section in the new journal. For example, the transition from the world's reliance on fossil fuels to renewable forms of energy is a rapidly growing, yet highly controversial, topic within our community. A journal focused on energy transition had been discussed and rejected many times in the past, but a section for energy transition proved to be acceptable.

- These sections would also be fluid and could grow and contract as research interests changed. The editorial board would be able to add, remove, or rename sections as needed.
- The larger journal footprint would hopefully lead to increased submissions and more engagement with our research community, which should ultimately translate to more citations. I noted that competing journals within our field tended to increase their impact factor as they grew. The growth of the journal may initially lower the impact factor as the other journals' content is added in, but the hope is to see citations and impact grow long term.
- With one submission site, one editorial board, and no need for transfers between our journals, this would simplify the submission and peer review process.
- The journal would be rebranded with an updated scope and detailed section descriptions that would serve as subsopes for each section.
- Importantly, the journal would keep the name of our most popular journal (*SPE Journal*) and since the scope was already broad, it only required minor updates. This would allow SPE to maintain its record in industry metrics such as Web of Science.

To say that my second pitch a year later, with data and a plan, went better would be an understatement. There was almost no pushback from my editors this time, and their concerns were now logistical and not existential. The editors made some minor tweaks to my plan, and we were off to the races (Figure 2).

## Implementation

Obtaining buy-in turned out to be the easy part. The plan was approved by SPE's board of directors in early 2023 with the goal of the first issue of the new consolidated journal publishing January 2024.

My team began with a comprehensive awareness campaign focused on editors and reviewers, and gradually spread out to readers, members, and the general public. It was important that SPE get the message right and help our audience to appreciate all the positives this change



Figure 2. Rebranded cover for the consolidated *SPE Journal*.

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would bring, while not dwelling on what would be lost. It was important that SPE never discussed closing a journal, instead focusing on the collaborative aspects of bringing all SPE's research under one title.

In the summer of 2023, my team began transferring manuscripts in active peer review into the new *SPE Journal* submission site, helping the authors to select the appropriate journal section. This is another area where I expected some pushback, but surprisingly, not a single author complained about transferring their paper. It turns out, they liked the extended reach and better impact factor of *SPE Journal*. With an article in our member magazine written by our editor-in-chief and multiple executive editor-led webinars on the consolidation, membership saw that SPE editorial leadership was supportive of the change and excited for the new future of the journal.

### What Did We Learn?

It is now nearly a year into the journal launch. It seemed a bit like a crazy idea at first, but the consolidation really has made SPE's journal program stronger.

- As mentioned earlier, from the announcement of the new journal in early 2023 until now, there has been a 20% increase in submissions compared with previous years, and the acceptance rate has stayed consistent, showing that these new papers are of similar quality to the old submissions.
- Our board of 8 executive editors and more than 100 associate editors now all work together as a single team, which has allowed for a better exchange of ideas.
- The 2 new sections that launched with the journal (Data Science & Engineering Analytics and Sustainability & Energy Transition) are growing quickly.
- One thing that surprised me is that the Drilling & Completion section has seen record growth in paper submissions, quickly becoming the second largest section. In the last 5 years, *SPE Drilling & Completion* journal was on a rapid decline in submissions. The

journal consolidation breathed new life into this research community.

- The editorial board has had to better define the journal sections. The authors choose what they believe is the best section for their paper, but often the editors must move the paper to a different section or outright reject it. This has been especially true for our newer sections, which get out-of-scope papers regularly.
- SPE's readers had to pay for a new individual subscription rate for the consolidated journal rather than buy individual journals. Most of our readers pay for a subscription to SPE's entire multisociety library (OnePetro.org), so this only reflects about 15% of revenue for the journal. Individual subscribers are down slightly with the change, but not as much as was originally predicted.

### Why Did This Work for SPE?

First, I do not believe journal consolidation is the best choice in every situation. SPE had a unique set of circumstances that made it a success:

- SPE had a broad-scope, high-performing journal that could easily capture the content from our specialized journals. This allowed the journal to keep the name the same and maintain its journal metrics.
- SPE's publications are online-only and the Society has not published print journals for nearly 10 years. This allowed the flexibility to offer larger issues.
- Most of SPE's subscribers access our journals through the multisociety library, and so the consolidation did not affect their cost or access in any way.
- I had the right editorial board, open to change and willing to take a risk.

I am proud of the new journal and excited to see how it grows and changes with our research community. If you have questions or want to learn more about the journal consolidation, please contact me at [bhibbard@spe.org](mailto:bhibbard@spe.org).