

Who reads editorials any more?

As we move toward “article-level publication”, the question of editorials is tormenting us. In article-level publication, as manuscripts are accepted and proofed, we will move to immediate online publication. This will result in speedier publication of submitted manuscripts for authors. It also reflects the rapid demise of the print journal. Subscriptions for print material are dwindling and as the world careers towards the “digi-sphere”, there comes a time where the scientific community must make a more permanent jump. And we are now preparing for that jump.

Traditionally, one received a hard copy of the journal and perused the list of contents, picking out interesting articles that had a relevance to the time, the place and the role that the reader occupied at the time. Sometimes, articles were earmarked for a group journal club. Perhaps, the reader, having a quiet moment in the library, would browse through a number of issues, earmarking interesting manuscripts.

The digi-sphere has changed how we use journals. It is often easier to use Google Scholar to identify the articles that fit with or reflect your chosen question. It is the application of just-in-time manufacturing to a scholarly question. Even PubMed and other cataloguing databases are being ousted from the “go-to” spot for academia. Twitter, LinkedIn and other social media platforms are gaining importance in the dissemination of scientific information.

So where does that leave editorials? In this issue, we are publishing 18 papers rather than the usual eight. We will be repeating this approach until we have the acceptance to publication window down to a shorter period. But the transition will be challenging to us as editors. Writing an editorial has always been an integral part of the role of an editor and not something that one took lightly. Even if nobody read the editorial, it was still a significant contribution, rather like the signature on the bottom of a letter. It signified the “human touch” element of the production of knowledge.

And now that human touch element will be redundant. Knowledge sharing is moving rapidly into a new space and those of us who are advancing in years may have to have a moment to mourn the passing of another small but significant element of traditional scientific publication. Soon we can stop having the man with the red flag walking in front of the horseless carriage ...

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