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Stray Thoughts

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Why do we need an electronic journal after all?

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Since the inception of this journal (on 25 February, 2000), many puzzled persons have asked me the above question. I thought the answer to this question was quite obvious. So I never really bothered even to think about it. It just came very naturally to me. Well, this question has been asked so many times over and over again, I thought I might as well try to answer it explicitly. In my editorial written for Volume 1, No. 2 (July - December 2000), some justifications were given. Some more have been given in aims and objectives section of this journal, but here is the more complete answer.

This internet journal is an entirely new concept in medical literature. It has no paper equivalent. The following are the advantages of an internet journal, as I perceive them:

1. A number of times, a little but useful experience of a forensic pathologist or toxicologist can not be converted into a valid paper, yet that experience could be very useful for the rest of us. A minor technique, a minor incision, which a forensic pathologist has discovered or found useful in his experience may not always be possible to be converted into a paper, yet could be very useful to the rest of us, if we had a means to know about that experience.

2. If you have a paper with several colour photographs, a traditional paper journal would hesitate to publish it, no matter how good your paper is. Certainly you would be asked to reduce the number of photographs, or have them published in Black and White. An internet journal can publish all of them in COLOR. In fact papers most suited for an internet journal are those which have a lot of color photographs.

3. Theses and dissertations can be published in full. Several dissertations are written all over the world, but they ultimately find a place in local libraries. Professionals from other nations (even from other parts of the same country) often don't get a chance to peruse through those dissertations. By publishing these dissertations, for the first time, we are making these dissertations available to all the professionals of the world. Ask any traditional "paper" journal if they would be

interested in publishing your dissertation in full (with color photographs and all!), and you would immediately realize the advantages of the internet journal.

4. An electronic journal may even have a social value. For instance, at the AA's Journal, we have an obituary section, where we mention the achievements of forensic personnel who have recently departed. A condolence book is maintained at the bottom of these obituary sections, where one can offer condolences by signing it, making it a very interactive journal. Obviously paper journals can't offer this. The maximum they can do is to run an obituary and that's it.

5. When readers access a particular paper, they can rate the paper through a voting box maintained at the bottom of each paper. This way we can know the opinion of other peers reading their papers. This internet poll is a unique way for the author to know, how his paper is being received by the audience. This kind of thing can not be achieved by a paper journal. We are even having two contests for the best paper and thesis, one run on a six-monthly basis, and the other a much more ambitious venture, in which polling would go on for a decade. The award would be called the "best paper of the decade" or the "best thesis of the decade".

6. Readers who read a paper, often leave their own experiences in the related field, in the guest book maintained at the bottom of each paper. A subsequent expert visiting the paper may not only leave comments on the main paper, but even on the comments left by previous experts! Thus the combined wisdom of all of us grows with time, from which all of us can take benefit.

7. There is a search box maintained on the main page. If you are looking for papers on a particular topic, say hanging or poroscopy, all you have to do is to type this word in the search box, and click. The search engine would automatically take you to the papers related to these subjects.

8. If by mistake there is some publishing error, say a different caption or some altered text, the author can immediately point it out, and the mistake can be corrected. No need to go on reading the entire wrong stuff, and waiting for the errata or corrigendum to appear next month, or may be next quarter.

9. Production costs are less, compared to paper journals, yet there is no compromise on quality. As a matter of fact, the quality is even better, as an editor of an E-journal does not have to worry about things like paper quality, ink quality and so on.

10. Tremendous savings in postage costs. To post an ordinary journal overseas, it takes anywhere between 100 to 200 Indian Rupees (10 to 20 $ in international currency). Taking the average cost of posting as Rs 150 only, it would take Rs 1,50,000 to post it to merely 1000 people. On the contrary the E-journal can be accessed by those very 1,000 people sitting anywhere in the world, in the comfort of their own homes, virtually at no cost either to them or to the publisher of the journal.

11. The journal has an ubiquitous existence. It can be accessed as easily in New Delhi, as in, say, Alaska or for that matter a remote village in Somalia (I am not sure if you can access it on the moon, or for that matter in Mariana Trench, if you have a laptop there. Please let me know!). The only requirement is that the person should have access to the internet. With the advent of the cyber cafés, access to internet has become almost universal, and so is the accessibility of E-journals.

12. A person who joins the mailing list can be sent ***all*** the previous issues in a single CD. Thus he can keep a track of what was published in the journal before he joined in. To do the same thing with a paper journal, one would need to mail a voluminous amount of material, which is possible only at enormous costs.

13. An Internet Journal poses less hassles. I know it for sure, as I have been associated with both types of journals as an editor (internet as well as paper). As an editor of an internet journal, I can send the papers out to editors instantaneously by E-mail, and their reply can come very soon via the same route. When I publish a paper on an internet journal, I don't have to make it visible to the whole world right from the start. I can upload the paper as a "hidden link", send this "hidden link" to the original author, who would see the paper and okay it. He would point out mistakes if there are any, and I would correct them. Only when the paper is finally okayed by everyone concerned, do I make the link visible to the rest of the world. People who have had their papers published in our journal know this for sure. You won't see any "errata" in this journal ever.

14. Papers related to same subject, say, hanging or poroscopy, even if published in different issues, can be hyperlinked to one another. Thus a reader researching on a particular subject can access all papers together.

Despite all their advantages I do not think internet journals will ever replace "paper journals". Certainly not in the near foreseeable future. I see both these genres rather as complementary entities than as rivals. They can - and must - co-exist. Just as cars and airplanes can - and must - co-exist!

After writing this piece, I was doing some research on this subject, and I was surprised, another editor (of another electronic journal) had the same dilemma of explaining this question. He has done this very nicely. Readers wanting to read his explanation may want to the linked page (editorial). For the record, this piece is written by Dr. M. Rosengarten for an online cardiology journal.

I am sure, there are readers out there who have thought of some more reasons why electronic journals are needed today. They may want to share their ideas with us. Kindly Email me to send your ideas, and we would try to put them (here on this very page) with due credits.