

Celebrating the Past: How Editors Relate Their Journals' Histories

Jennifer Ann Hutt

Collectively, scientific journals have a long history. In January 1665, the French publication *Le Journal des Scavans* became what is often regarded as the first scientific journal.¹ A second, the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, followed only a few months later.² By the end of the 1700s, about 100 scientific journals were in print. In 50 years, that number was up to 1,000; by 1900, up to 10,000.³

Today, tens of thousands of scientific journals are published all over the world. Some are long established, such as Yale's *American Journal of Science*, begun in 1818 by Benjamin Silliman and now the oldest continuously published scientific journal in the United States.⁴ Other journals have a more recent history, such as *Proteomics*; edited by Michael J Dunn in London, this journal was established in 2001.

Whether a publication has been around for 2 years or 200, each has a history—a unique story of its origin, its growth, and the people who made it a success. Some publications have celebrated their histories by publishing collections of old articles, biographies of former editors, or reflective commentaries. This article explores the many ways that editors have chosen to convey their journals' histories.

Varieties of Journal Histories

Leafing through a stack of journal histories shows that authors have found creative ways to relate the history of a journal. Some have opted for a feature-length article about the publication's history. Martha Tacker, former editor of *CBE Views* (the predecessor of *Science Editor*), took this approach when writing the history that

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appeared in the January 2000 issue.⁵ In 1977, the editor and assistant editor of *Annals of Internal Medicine*, Edward J Huth and Kathleen Case (then Kathleen Van Steenburg), did the same with their seven-page history marking the 50th anniversary of that publication. Huth (now editor emeritus at the journal) and Case (now a publisher for the American Association of Cancer Research after many years as executive editor of *Annals of Internal Medicine*) recently wrote a second history highlighting the most recent 25 years of the journal; this slightly longer article ran in *Annals of Internal Medicine* in July 2002.⁷

Roy Pitkin, editor emeritus of *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, took a different approach with what is perhaps the first book-length narrative devoted to the history of a scientific journal. "I wanted [the history] to be as complete as possible, not just a summary", Pitkin said. When the current issue of *Science Editor* went to press, Pitkin's 220-page book, *The Green Journal: 50 Years On*,⁸ was scheduled to be delivered to journal subscribers in January 2003. A limited number of copies will be available from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

Some journals, including the *Journal of Biological Chemistry* (*JBC*), have addressed the journal's history from many perspectives by producing a series of brief articles and publishing them sequentially. *JBC*, for example, has prepared a number of articles that are appearing periodically in the journal in anticipation of its 100th anniversary in 2005. These articles have included "The First Years of the *Journal of Biological Chemistry*",⁹ "Regulation, Restriction, and Reminiscences",¹⁰ and "A Trail of Research from Lipoic Acid to α -Keto Acid Dehydrogenase Complexes".¹¹

The journals *Nature* and *Pediatrics* published collections of articles similar to those in *JBC* all at once as supplements,^{12,13} and the *Journal of Polymer Science* produced both

a series and, later, a bound volume.¹⁴

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* (*JAMA*) celebrated its centennial over 2 years, 1982-1984, in several ways: a monthly feature, "Medicine in the USA: Historical Vignettes", by Lester S King; a centennial issue (8 July 1983) that featured a replica of the first *JAMA* cover on its cover and a 40-page replica of the first issue within the issue itself; and the publication of 50 landmark *JAMA* articles, one a week, accompanied by a current "perspective" authored by an expert in the same field from today. The 50 landmark articles and perspectives were eventually collected and published in book form in 1985 (now out of print, but a few copies are available from *JAMA*).

Frequently, a journal history's release date coincides with an anniversary of the publication. It could be the centenary, as in the case of *JBC* and *JAMA*, or a first anniversary, as in the case of the 1998 article "Pediatrics Electronic Pages: Looking Back and Looking Ahead", which appeared in *Pediatrics* a year after the online publication's debut.¹⁵ Or an anniversary of the parent organization, rather than of the publication, can be the occasion for a journal history.

In the case of *CBE Views*, the history was published during a time of transition. The article "CBE Views: A Look Back" traced the past but also marked the emergence of a new name (*Science Editor*), new format, and slightly new objective as the publication (and the organization) expanded to include editors in sciences other than biology.

Regarding content, there seem to be two basic approaches to presenting a publication's history. Some authors have focused primarily on the people involved in the journal's past, highlighting editors, staff, the decisions they made, and the goals they sought. That approach is taken in many of the articles in the *Pediatrics* supplement.

Other publications have taken a more

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product-centered approach, focusing on what the journal has published over the years and the impact it has had on readers. Editors at the *Journal of Polymer Science*, for example, selected a set of especially important papers published by the journal and reprinted them in their original format with expert commentaries on the papers' impact in the field. For example, the commentary "The Measurement of Blood Gases and the Manometric Techniques Developed by Donald Dexter Van Slyke"¹⁶ accompanied Van Slyke's 1924 paper.¹⁷

While looking for a model for his book, Pitkin said he noticed that distinction: "One [approach] focuses on the process and participants; one focuses on the outcome", Pitkin said. "I decided to try to do both." His book consists of 13 chapters. The first eight provide a narrative history of the people behind the journal, and the last five look at the research trends and important publications of each decade.

Pitkin is not alone in his attempt to balance the production aspect of a journal's history with a look back at the publication's content. The editors at *JBC* decided to address both aspects of the story but to do so separately. In preparation for the publication's centenary in 2005, *JBC* has begun publishing, in its online version only, reprints of important papers in the journal's history. Each reprint is accompanied by an editorial commentary about the life of the author, the context of the research, and the significance of the paper. The reprints and commentaries supplement the series of articles written by biochemists about their memories in the field, which are being published in both the print version and the electronic version.

It seems different types of authors tend to write different kinds of historical articles. Journal histories focusing on published research, like that of *JBC*, sometimes include commentaries or reflective articles from the scientists involved in the research. Narratives about the publication itself are generally written by editors, former editors, or others with an insider's perspective.

Writing a Journal History: Where

Turning a Journal's Files into a Serviceable Archive

Jennifer Ann Hutt

Perhaps next year marks a journal's 25th, 50th, or even 100th anniversary. Unfortunately, the resources needed for a publication celebrating the occasion may be buried in random boxes in the office basement or be missing entirely.

According to CSE archivist Jane Kenamore, of the archive consulting company Kenamore & Klinkow, most organizations don't think about starting an archive until faced with a major anniversary. That can make writing a journal history difficult, in that authors generally rely on archived issues and reports.

Edward Huth, editor emeritus of *Annals of Internal Medicine* and coauthor of two journal histories, stresses the importance of establishing a good archive before writing a history. "If anyone thinks they might want a history in the future, make sure these resources are being built up", he said.

The first step in building an archive is to gather all the available materials. Although often forgotten, photographs are especially important in an archive, Kenamore said, because they catch people's attention. Huth, too, emphasizes the value of archiving photographs. "You might not think anyone would care, but 50 years from now people might want to see what the editorial office looked like", he said. Here are some items to consider including in an archive:

- Photographs of people, offices, buildings.
- Back issues of the publication.
- Minutes of the editorial-board meetings.
- Letters and memos that reflect editorial or administrative decisions.
- Important papers presented at annual meetings.
- Programs of meetings and events.
- Annual reports.
- Membership directories.

Once all the materials have been collected, Kenamore recommends finding an archivist who can estimate how much the project will cost on the basis of the

amount of material and the desired level of organization. Kenamore, who has served on the council of the Society of American Archivists (SAA), said many archival consultants are members of SAA; they can be found through the organization's Web site at www.archivists.org.

It is possible for members of a publication staff to prepare and maintain an archive themselves. But after 27 years of experience in working with archives, Kenamore said she does not recommend that option. An archive that is not maintained by a professional will often destroy itself quickly, she said, "because no one is as picky as an archivist about maintaining order and easy access to information."

Managing an archive is hard to do by oneself, Kenamore said, because it has to be maintained with continuity. "Don't plan on doing it in your spare time, because you'll never have any", she said. Also, trained archivists have learned specific techniques for organization and preservation that can maximize the utility and quality of an archive.

For example, different types of records vary in their usefulness and in their preservability. "Digital records are great for reference because you have easy access", Kenamore said, but a compact disk is estimated to last only about 25 years, whereas some archived black-and-white photographs have been useful for more than 150 years. Similarly, videotapes generally last only 20 years, and color photographs may fade in the same amount of time.

There are ways to extend the life of those records, such as storing them at a constant low temperature, but they are still generally unstable. Archivists can offer advice about the best way to store and preserve specific types of digital and paper records.

Whether a journal archive is maintained by a professional archivist or by the journal staff, having historical records organized and ready for reference is the first step toward writing an accurate journal history. 

To Begin

When writing a publication's history, authors often begin by leafing through old issues. The kinds of additional resources available depend on the age of the journal, the condition of its archive, and the level of personal involvement the writer has had in the journal's affairs.

If a history is being written by someone intimately acquainted with the journal's affairs, personal recollections may be a valuable resource. However, unique challenges arise when editors or other staff members attempt to write the histories of their own journals. For example, Huth said he had to guard against personal bias related to some of the people and decisions in the journal's history. He asked himself, "Is it fair to air internal friction?" and tried to discern what should be included in the article and what was best left unsaid—things he described as "the kind of stuff that might be interesting as gossip, but hardly part of a history."

Interviews with people who were involved in the journal's early stages are another great asset—if they can be obtained. But, Pitkin pointed out, the ability to find primary sources depends on how old the journal is. "There are three people I would give my left arm to get hold of, but I can't because they're dead and gone", he said.

Archived records can be useful, too, both for prompting memories and for filling in gaps. Huth supplemented his recollections with annual reports from the editors. "That helped jog my memory", he said. "I think it is very important to go back and look at written reports and not just rely on memory."

Unfortunately, archives generally have gaps of their own. "The main problem is a lack of data", Pitkin said. "That's a problem for historians in general. . . . You have to find the paper trail."

Pitkin found the minutes of the *Obstetrics & Gynecology* editorial board to be very helpful. They go into considerable detail, he said, but the archive includes records

only since the 1970s. The records from the first 20 years of the journal are missing because the journal was under a different editor and had since moved offices. For the 2 decades for which detailed minutes are missing, Pitkin had to rely on the annual summary reports that the editor had provided for the executive board of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

Huth had similar difficulties and now urges anyone considering writing a history to think about what is available in the archive. It is important to keep archival material that can be drawn on, he said. "If I had known in 1977 that I would be writing a history 25 years later, I would have kept some archives of my own", he said. (For information about archives, see the sidebar "Turning a Journal's Files into a Serviceable Archive".)

Once the initial draft of a history is complete, Huth stressed the value of sending copies for review to previous editors and others who might have been around during the period the history covers. For example, Huth and Case enlisted five external reviewers for their recent article. "You can always benefit from another pair of eyes", Huth said.

A growing number of journals have devoted time and effort to telling their histories. More and more journals are publishing information about their past, and they are finding creative ways to do it. History is important, Pitkin said. He then referred to the familiar words of George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Pitkin's final advice to those thinking about writing a history of their journal—"Do it!" 

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