

Comment

JCOM — FIVE YEARS IN THE FUTURE

Open spaces for debate and discussion

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ABSTRACT: JCOM can enhance its contribution to the science communication community by greater rigour in selection and editing and by opening up to reader comment.

Journals are an important part of the life of intellectual communities. That remains the case despite the proliferation of diverse forms of electronic publishing and networking. We still look to journals for authoritative research and reflection and we mine them as repositories of collective memory.

In science communication, much more than in the natural sciences, and possibly more than in other branches of social sciences, books are also major markers of our intellectual journey. Perhaps reflecting the status of science communication as a still-emerging (inter-)discipline, the major works are edited volumes of essays that look rather like especially thick special issues of journals.

In the cases both of journals and of edited volumes, it is the individual article, paper, essay or chapter that is most often cited rather than the book or the journal edition. The principal unit of production is the 10- or 20-page piece of work on a relatively narrowly defined topic.

This makes the adherence to publication of journals on a two-monthly or three-monthly cycle appear rather anomalous. This is especially the case for JCOM, which is published in electronic form only and does not have the commercial motive of seeking library subscriptions for both print and electronic versions.

JCOM has been a valuable space for reflection on developments in science communication and now, as it initiates a discussion on its own future, it can be a valuable space for reflection on communication about science communication.

As someone who practices, teaches and researches science communication, I have found JCOM an indispensable resource. I have referred frequently to research articles and to comments in JCOM both for teaching and research purposes. I also have been happy to be an occasional contributor to the journal and a reviewer and adviser to the editors on possible reviewers.

For me, JCOM's strengths lie most obviously in its no-cost, universal accessibility, in its relatively rapid turnaround of contributions, in the space it provides for comments from various perspectives on shared topics, in having the facility to publish original versions as well as English translations, and in the diversity of countries and cultures

that it draws from. The 52 articles (not Comments) published in JCOM in 2009–2012 had authors from a total of 21 countries in all continents. A comparison with one of the commercially published journals in our field showed a vastly greater dependence on contributions from US and UK sources.

The journal's weaknesses lie in the too-great variability of the quality of published pieces. Sometimes the non-native English makes it difficult to be sure about the precise meanings. Sometimes the topics seem more suited to a journal on information management or history of science than one on science communication. Sometimes the research articles show the need for more careful scrutiny of the data and of the arguments based on them. (I could also make the last point about many of the high-cost journals in communication studies, including science communication.)

My proposal to JCOM for the next phase of its existence is that it seeks to build on its strengths and minimise its weaknesses as follows:

- Apply more stringent standards to selection of research articles but publish them individually as they become ready;
- Open the peer review process, so that contributors and reviewers are identified to each other, can recognise possible conflicts of interest, and can continue their exchanges after publication;
- Periodically publish the names of those who have reviewed articles;
- Increase the use of invited editors for themed groups of Comments, and ensure diverse viewpoints are represented;
- Extend these groups of Comments by facilitating contributions from readers, on the basis that these contributions must be “signed” (i.e. not anonymous or pseudonymous) and are subject to moderation — including an editorial decision to close the discussion when this is appropriate.

JCOM already draws from and addresses a global community of people engaged in or with science communication in various ways. As contributions to this journal and to related conferences and other forums indicate, this global community is actively interested in the prospects for science communication. JCOM could become the main place for keeping up with such discussions in particular through careful forward planning and curation of its Comments.

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