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Examining JAC: An Analysis of the Scholarly Progression of the Journal of Applied Communications

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Abstract

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Keywords

Journal of Applied Communications (JAC), scholarly publication, agricultural, private business, information, social policy, scientific research

Examining JAC: An Analysis of the Scholarly Progression of the Journal of Applied Communications

Traci L. Naile, J. Tanner Robertson, and D. Dwayne Cartmell II

Abstract

The peer-review process influences scholarly publication, authors, readers, and the direction of scientific research. In addition, this process may have a broader influence on society if policy implications are associated with scientific discovery (Hobart, Gonnell, & Caellegh, 2003). As the Journal of Applied Communications (JAC) is an outlet for scholarly, peer-reviewed publication by agricultural communicators, it must be analyzed and questioned to meet the needs of the profession (Miller, Stewart, & West, 2006). This study examined the content of JAC from 1990 to 2006 by reporting descriptive information about the content of JAC and examining the progression of published scholarly research within the framework of the peer-review process. In Volume 74(1) (1990) through Volume 90(4) (2006) of JAC, 222 research and non-research articles were published. About three-quarters (73.4%) of the articles published in JAC were research articles, and 18 methods were used and 64 populations were examined in those research articles. More than 300 authors published in JAC during the selected time period, representing more than 70 universities, agencies, and private business. Trends in the numbers of research and non-research articles were not identified, although co-authored papers were more likely to be research-based. The combined research and non-research structure of JAC provides resources for a variety of professionals in agricultural communications. Based on the results of this study, JAC does serve as a scholarly outlet for disseminating current knowledge, archiving disciplinary knowledge, controlling the quality of information, and assigning priority and credit to authors' work (Rowland, 2002).

Introduction

“Peer review of scholarly manuscripts by qualified reviewers is the cornerstone of scientific publication” (Hojat, Gonnella, & Caellegh, 2003, p. 76), and the outcomes of peer-reviewed research influence authors, journal readers, and the direction of scientific research. In addition, peer-reviewed research may have a broad impact on society if social policy implications are part of research findings and interpretations (Hojat et al.). As scientific research progresses, disciplines must analyze and determine core areas of inquiry (Osborne, n.d.). The National Research Agenda for Agricultural Education and Communication (Osborne) identified these areas and employed a team of agricultural education, communications, and leadership scholars throughout the United States in an effort to advance the scholarly progression of these disciplinary areas.

As one part of advancing scholarly progression, authors must identify appropriate outlets for publishing research efforts. Recently, scholars within agricultural communications have focused their attention on analyzing what may be the leading peer-reviewed journal in the discipline: the *Journal*

of *Applied Communications* (Miller, Stewart, & West, 2006; Williams & Woods, 2002): “those among the discipline must constantly analyze it [*JAC*], question its purpose, and propose new directions in order for it to grow, progress, and be of use to the profession it serves” (Miller et al., p. 3).

The Journal of Applied Communications

The *Journal of Applied Communications* is published quarterly by the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE) (ACE, n.d.). Zumalt (2007) identified *JAC* as one publication among the core periodical literature in agricultural communications during a study of the Agricultural Communications Documentation Center database. *JAC* was second of 45 periodicals that represented slightly more than one-half of the ACDC periodical collection, and it was the peer-reviewed publication with the most citations (Zumalt).

The journal is divided into four areas: research and evaluation, professional development, commentary, and review (Telg, Tucker, & Dolbier, 2001). Research and evaluation includes “traditional scholarly research articles” (Telg et al., p. 8) consisting of quantitative and/or qualitative methodologies. As *JAC* is an applied journal, the professional development category focuses on the “author’s particular expertise on a subject matter that will benefit career performance of ACE members” (ACE, n.d.). Commentary articles are opinion pieces typically focusing on trends or important issues in communications, and critiques of books, journal articles, software programs, and other related resources are reserved as review articles.

Based on a 2007 *JAC* readership survey conducted by ACE, about one-half (54%) of ACE members who read *JAC* have published a research article in the journal. Additionally, 26% of readers have published a professional development article, 14% a review, and 10% a commentary. More respondents indicated they were “highly interested” in reading about applied communications research than any other category, yet less than half (35%) of respondents indicated peer-reviewed publishing is required for career advancement (A. Aubuchon, personal communication, July 19, 2007).

In contrast, respondents to a 1996 *JAC* readership survey expressed dissatisfaction with the technical content of research articles. Comments included “... sometimes a preponderance of quantitative articles can be a bit overwhelming ... too researchy at times,” and “... the research articles are laborious to go through – usually read the problem and conclusions” (Brooks, 1996, p. 47). Practitioners in other disciplines have expressed similar concerns about the relationship between research and practice. For example, nurses and midwives may “see research as removed from practice, and feel disenchanting with an activity which they view as specialized, esoteric and elitist” (Heyman & Cronin, 2005, p. 401).

In agricultural communications, practitioners may gain insights from research that aid them in accomplishing their primary task: “to get information to people, ideally through the most effective and efficient channels” (Hays, 1996, p. 3). Through *JAC*, researchers and practitioners have an opportunity to exchange information to advance the discipline. As Miller et al. (2006) commented, “the results of agricultural communications research should guide agricultural communications practitioners’ work, which should set the course for academicians further research” (p. 3).

Conceptual Framework: Role of the Peer-review Process in Scholarly Publication

Bailar and Patterson (1985) defined the peer review process as “expert assessment of materials submitted for publication in scientific and technical journals,” and journals such as *JAC* are included

in that description. As a provider of peer-reviewed information for professionals and academics, *JAC* serves as an important indicator of the state of research in agricultural communications. That research is vital to policy decisions made and facilitated by agricultural communicators (Hojat et al., 2003).

Arriving at a publication decision via typical peer-review systems involves up to six steps: 1) submission to the editorial office of a journal; 2) initial decision of acceptance or rejection by the editor; 3) accepted papers sent to an average of two reviewers who are experts in the field; 4) classification by reviewers as publishable immediately, publishable with improvements, or not publishable; 5) changes suggested by reviewers; and 6) papers sent to a third reviewer, or the editor serves as third reviewer if initial reviewers disagree (Meadows, 1998). Prior to World War II, however, the peer-review process was largely unstructured; editors typically made publication decisions with little advice from colleagues (Weller, 2001). The modern peer-review system consisting of editors and expert reviewers became common only in recent times (Rowland, 2002).

Miracle (2008) identified four reasons for conducting the peer-review process: 1) to determine if the content in the manuscript is accurate and relevant for the readers of the journal; 2) to maintain scientific rigor; 3) to reduce the potential for bias; and 4) to determine if material presented in scholarly journals is valid and reliable. Peer-reviewed publication offers one method for effectively reaching wide audiences and maximizing the impact of research findings (Duff, 2001). Heyman and Cronin (2005) pointed out that publishing for the sake of publishing should be avoided, although “research and scholarship cannot influence practice and policy unless findings are disseminated” (p. 400).

The peer-review process has been examined in multiple fields with the goal of obtaining opinions about the system’s usefulness and reliability. A series of surveys conducted by the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (1999, 2001, 2002) found favorable opinions of the peer-review process, and prior to the surveys, researchers noted the peer-review process was working and worthwhile (Bailar & Patterson, 1985; McKnight & Price, 1999; Pierie, Walvoort, & Overbeke, 1996). The peer-review system, however, has not always been viewed favorably by the researchers who rely upon it for their survival in academia (Hojat et al., 2003). In contrast to the ALPSP studies, authors previously found the peer-review system to be crude, unfair, and biased (Kassirer & Champion, 1994; Sharp, 1990).

Peer review remains the standard in scholarly publication, regardless of the system used and questions raised about reliability (Heyman & Cronin, 2005; Hojat et al., 2003; Miracle, 2008; Rowland, 2002). More than 75% of journals represented in the 2001 survey conducted by ALPSP reported refereeing all papers submitted, with the modal number of submissions ranging from 100 to 500 and a modal acceptance rate ranging from 25-50% (ALPSP, 2001). Of those journals using a peer-review system, 88% kept reviewers’ identities concealed, compared to 40% that reported using a double-blind review system (ALPSP). Low rates of acceptance and concealed reviewer identities thus give reviewers and the entire peer-review system considerable power (Crandall, 1982) in guiding the direction of research that may impact society in a number of ways (Hojat et al.; Meadows, 1998).

Scholarly Publication in the Journal of Applied Communications

As *JAC* has evolved from its first publication in 1968 as *aaace* (Carnahan, 2000) to the current peer-reviewed quarterly journal, its peer-review system has paralleled the basic steps identified by Meadows (1998). All papers submitted for publication in *JAC* initially are routed through the ACE

headquarters to the executive editor, who distributes all articles for blind review. If the article is accepted during the blind review process, then a final copy with revisions is submitted to the executive editor for final review before publication (ACE, n.d.).

Zumalt (2007) concluded that periodical literature in agricultural communications is vital to multiple audiences, including practitioners and researchers, who are interested in effective communications in agriculture. The need for communications in the face of issues confronting modern American agriculture has been recognized throughout agriculture and public institutions, leading to an increased role of agricultural communicators in creating communication strategies (Williams & Woods, 2002). “Frequent examination of recent research in the discipline will aid in evaluating growth and progress and will provide direction for future research and practice” (Miller et al., 2006). One method for evaluating this progress is to examine the peer-reviewed contributions by academicians and practitioners, who use available research as a foundation for training students to become communication professionals.

This study examined the content of the *Journal of Applied Communications* from 1990 through 2006 as one measure of the progression of scholarly publication in agricultural communications. The specific objectives of the study were 1) to report descriptive information about the content of the *Journal of Applied Communications*, including the number of research and non-research articles, use of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, number of authors per article, authorship by institution, use of research methods, and populations explored; and 2) to examine trends in the progression of scholarly research published in the *Journal of Applied Communications*, including contributing universities, number of authors, methods used, and populations examined.

Methods

Journal articles published in Volumes 74(1) (1990) through 90(4) (2006), the most recent issue available, of *JAC* were analyzed via content analysis. Content analysis is “a formal system for doing something we all do informally rather frequently—draw conclusions from observations of content” (Stempel III, 2003, p. 209). Miller et al. (2006) described content analysis procedures as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from textual data to their context” (p. 7).

Articles were divided into two categories: research and non-research. Research articles included any *JAC* publication that supplied traditional research-based information in the article, specifically methods, quantitative and/or qualitative findings, and discussion of findings. All other articles were placed in the non-research category. All articles, excluding reviews, were analyzed, as volumes prior to 2001 did not separate articles into the presently used sections (Telg et al., 2001) and articles defined as research publications for the purpose of this study may have been published in all sections under the current *JAC* structure. In addition, *JAC* submission guidelines state all submissions are peer-reviewed and do not provide procedures for selecting reviewers based on type of article (ACE, n.d.).

Descriptive information, including number of authors, universities, and number of articles published yearly in the *JAC*, was coded through assignment of numerical values. Research articles were further examined and coded, separating framework, methodology, and population studied. Framework was divided into two distinct categories: theoretical and conceptual. The theoretical category represented all research articles that referenced at least one specific theory in the article. Research articles that did not reference a specific theory or theories as a basis for research were categorized as conceptual. Frequencies, means, modes, percentages, and cross-tabulations were used to interpret the data and describe publication trends of *JAC*.

Results

Objective 1: Content of the Journal of Applied Communications

In Volumes 74(1) through 90(4) of *JAC*, 222 research and non-research articles were published. Three hundred five unique authors contributed to those articles, with a total of 459 authors listed on the 222 articles published. About one-quarter (26.6%) of the articles published between 1990 and 2006 were not research articles. Of the articles that were considered research (73.4%), 19% used a theoretical framework and 81% used a conceptual framework.

Single authors were responsible for 37.8% of the articles examined, while 32.4% of the articles were written by two authors and 19.8% were written by three authors. The maximum number of authors listed for any article was 6 ($n = 1$, non-research). The most common number of authors for research articles was two ($n = 60$), while single authors were most common for non-research articles ($n = 36$). The number of authors per research and non-research articles is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Frequency of number of authors per research and non-research articles (N = 222)

No. of authors	Research ($n = 163$)		
	Theoretical ($n = 31$)	Conceptual ($n = 132$)	Non-research ($n = 59$)
1	8, 25.8%	40, 30.3%	36, 61.0%
2	14, 45.2%	46, 34.8%	12, 20.3%
3	6, 19.4%	31, 23.5%	7, 11.9%
4	2, 6.5%	11, 8.3%	2, 3.4%
5	1, 3.2%	4, 3.0%	1, 1.7%
6	0	0	1, 1.7%

JAC authors represented 70 universities, agencies, and private businesses. Table 2 lists the 10 institutions represented the most in total authorship ($N = 459$) of all articles ($N = 222$).

The University of Florida was the most represented institution, with slightly more than double the representation of the second-most represented organization, Texas A&M University.

Eighteen methods were used to obtain data in research articles published in *JAC* from 1990 to 2006. The most commonly used method was mail survey (39.3%), followed by multiple method (14.8%), content analysis (8.6%), online survey (7.4%), and focus group (5.5%). Multiple method refers to a combination of two or more research methods, either quantitative or qualitative. The combinations of methods most frequently included the most common methods used, as well as on-site survey and observations. Table 3 shows the most commonly used methods, including methods that were tied in the rankings.

Table 2
Representation of universities in total authorship (N = 459)

University (N = 70)	Representation (n)	%
University of Florida	62	13.5
Texas A&M University	29	6.3
Pennsylvania State University	28	6.1
The Ohio State University	27	5.9
Iowa State University	26	5.7
University of Illinois	22	4.8
Kansas State University	18	3.9
North Carolina State University	18	3.9
Oklahoma State University	12	2.6
Oregon State University	12	2.6

Table 3
Most common methods used in research articles

Method (N = 18)	No. of articles (n = 163)	%
Survey, mail	64	39.3
Multiple method	24	14.8
Content analysis	14	8.6
Survey, online	12	7.4
Focus group	9	5.5
Case study	7	4.3
Survey, unknown	5	3.1
Interview	4	2.5
Survey, telephone	3	1.8
Testing	2	1.2
Interview, mixed	2	1.2
Survey, in person	2	1.2

Research articles published in *JAC* from 1990 to 2006 examined 64 uniquely defined populations. The most commonly studied population was university faculty/staff (14.7%), followed by farmers (8.6%), mixed population (8.0%), college students (8.0%), and populations not clearly identified (4.3%). Mixed population refers to a combination of two or more separately described sets of people. Table 4 shows the most common populations studied, including populations that were tied in the rankings.

Table 4
Most common populations studied in research articles

Population (<i>N</i> = 64)	No. of articles (<i>n</i> = 163)	%
University faculty/staff	24	14.7
Farmers	14	8.6
Mixed	13	8.0
College students	13	8.0
Not clearly defined	7	4.3
Extension clientele	6	3.7
Extension educators	5	3.1
ACE members	4	2.5
Urban newspapers	4	2.5
Extension personnel	4	2.5
Agricultural newspaper subscribers	3	1.8
Agricultural communications professional organization members	3	1.8
Agricultural magazine subscribers	3	1.8
College graduates	3	1.8

Objective 2: Trends in Scholarly Publication in the Journal of Applied Communications

Cross-tabulation between year of publication and type of article did not demonstrate clear trends in the numbers of research and non-research articles published from 1990 through 2006. With the exception of three years—1990, 1999, and 2002—all types of articles were published in each volume of *JAC*. Figure 1 shows the proportions of theoretical, conceptual, and non-research articles published in *JAC* from 1990 through 2006.

Cross-tabulation between author number and framework was analyzed to determine trends in research collaboration efforts by *JAC* authors. Co-authored papers were more likely to be research-based. In addition, the majority (70.6%) of theory-based research publications and conceptual-based research publications were co-authored. The number of authors for theoretical, conceptual, and non-research articles is shown in Table 1.

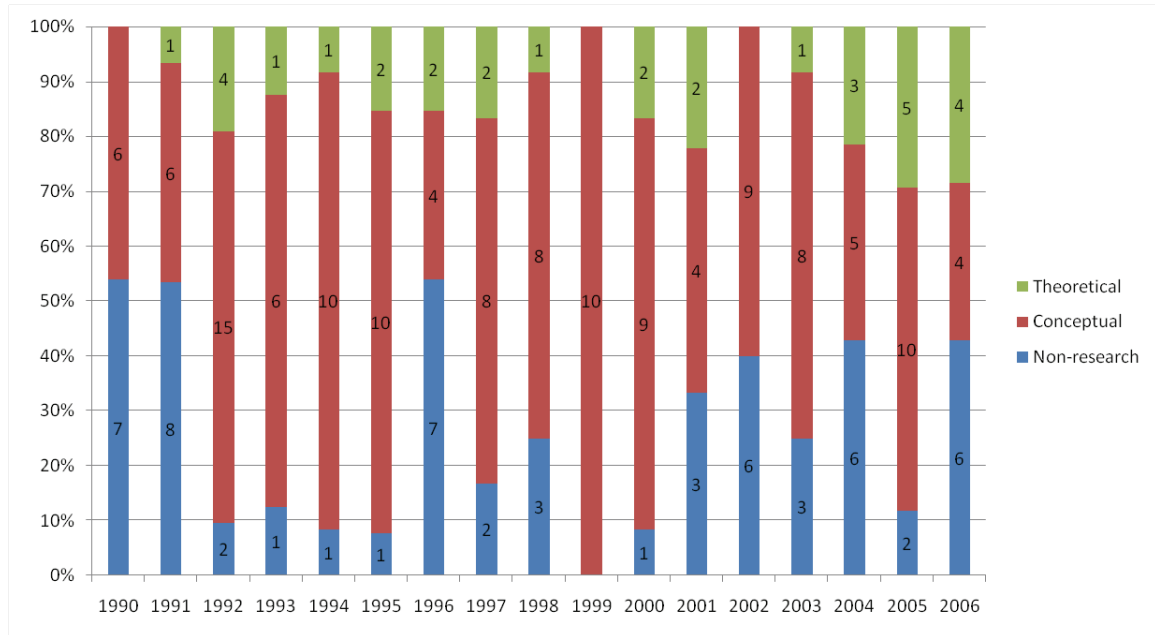


Figure 1. Frequency of type of article by year (N = 222)

Methods were cross-tabulated with the frameworks used in research articles to assess trends in the foundations of research published in *JAC*. About one-third (35.5%) of theoretical articles described use of mail surveys ($n = 11$). More than half (56.1%) of conceptual articles described a mail survey ($n = 52$) or multiple methods ($n = 22$) approach. In addition, qualitative methods, such as focus groups and interviews, tended to be cited more in conceptual articles. Table 5 shows the frameworks used with the most common methods cited in research articles.

Table 5

Frameworks used with the most common methods in research articles ($n = 163$)

Method (N = 18)	Theoretical ($n = 31$)	Conceptual ($n = 132$)
Survey, mail	11, 35.5%	52, 39.4%
Mixed method	2, 6.5%	22, 16.7%
Content analysis	7, 22.6%	7, 5.3%
Survey, online	2, 6.5%	10, 7.6%
Focus group	3, 9.7%	6, 4.6%
Case study	1, 3.2%	6, 4.6%
Survey, unknown	0	5, 3.8%
Interview	1, 3.2%	3, 2.3%
Survey, telephone	1, 3.2%	2, 1.5%
Testing	0	2, 1.5%
Interview, mixed	0	2, 1.5%
Survey, in person	1, 3.2%	1, 0.8%

Discussion and Conclusions

As *JAC* is analyzed for its usefulness in serving agricultural communications scholars and professionals, examining the trends in publication within the journal provides a measure of how *JAC* contributes to scholarly development of the discipline. The journal's stated purpose is to offer "professional development for educational communicators who emphasize agriculture, the food industry, and natural resources" (ACE, n.d.), and *JAC* achieves this purpose in current volumes through publication of research and evaluation, professional development, commentary, and review articles. Telg et al. (2001) stated: "Through commentaries and opinion pieces, the journal offers an avenue to discuss and debate important ... issues facing our profession today. Professional development articles can suggest easier, more efficient ways to do our jobs, while research articles increase our knowledge base ..." (p.15).

The content of articles such as those published in *JAC* (Telg et al., 2001) impacts the direction of agricultural communications research, as peer-reviewed publications serve as the foundation for advancing knowledge within a discipline (Hojat et al., 2003). Based on this study, some evidence exists to support the progression of *JAC* as a leading outlet for scholarly literature, while also meeting its purpose as a professional development resource for educational communicators. About one-quarter (26.6%) of all articles published from 1990 to 2006 were non-research publications, as methods, quantitative and/or qualitative findings, and discussions of findings were not reported. *JAC* does not appear to be moving toward a research-only publication, as professional development and/or commentary articles appeared consistently throughout the 16-year timeframe. As only 35% of respondents to the 2007 *JAC* readership survey indicated peer-reviewed publishing is required for career advancement (A. Aubuchon, personal communication, July 19, 2007), consistent publication of non-research articles is not surprising.

Single-authored submissions represented about half (51.5%) of all articles published. Analysis of the number of authors credited for research and non-research articles demonstrated that single authors are typical for commentary and non-research professional development articles, which were included in the non-research category of this content analysis. This trend in authorship further supports the dual purpose of *JAC*, as research typically involves multiple investigator-authors and professional development information may be based on the experiences of one communications practitioner.

In ranking universities based on the number of times they were represented by authors in *JAC* from 1990 to 2006, the University of Florida was found to be the most-represented university of the 70 institutions credited in research and non-research articles. In addition, post-hoc analysis showed the universities represented in the top 10 of authorship produced more research publications than non-research publications, although whether the authors were from academic or service units was not determined. Institutional reputation and representation may reflect on and influence the peer-review process (Hojat et al., 2003), and the most-represented universities in this study traditionally have been recognized for strong agricultural communications and journalism programs and services.

Articles classified as research publications were analyzed beyond the number of authors and institutional representation to discover basic characteristics of the peer-reviewed research included in *JAC*. Initially, the frameworks of research articles were classified as theory-based or conceptual-based to identify the foundations for research published from 1990 to 2006. In this study, a clear reference to a theory and its application to the reported research were required for articles to be classified as theoretical. As a result, articles lacking such a discussion were classified as conceptual. Examination

of the research articles revealed a relatively low proportion of theory-based publications (19%) compared to conceptually-based publications (81%), indicating that authors in *JAC* either relied more on conceptual frameworks for research or failed to develop theoretical discussions as foundations for research. As theory is key to scientific publication and applied practices in agricultural communications, it is imperative that theoretical frameworks and discussions be included in *JAC*, one of the leading journals in the field (Miller et al., 2006; Williams & Woods, 2002), to advance the profession.

Analysis of the methods reported in *JAC* research articles from 1990 to 2006 also was performed. The most common method used to conduct research was mail survey, followed by multiple method, content analyses, online surveys, and focus groups. In this study, multiple method was defined as a combination of two or more established research methods used to obtain data. The representation of quantitative and qualitative methodologies among the common research methods reported indicated a need for a variety of ways to explore agricultural communications, and the ranking of multiple-method research as the second-most common method provides further support for the importance of various research methods to scholarly work in the discipline. In addition, cross-tabulation between method and framework suggested researchers used multiple or qualitative methodologies for conceptual or exploratory frameworks and survey methodologies more for theory-based frameworks. These findings could suggest *JAC* researchers and its peer reviewers recognize foundational sociological research design and the natural progression for advancing the discipline.

With the necessity for replicating research studies in various environments to qualify generalizations and applications of results, it was expected that some populations were investigated multiple times from 1990 to 2006. Studies reporting either sampling or census of specified populations may be limited in generalizability, but it was discovered that common terms were used to report population descriptions. The most frequently studied populations were representative of common audiences and stakeholders in agricultural communications, including university faculty/staff, farmers, mixed populations, college students, and extension clientele. Mixed populations were defined in this study as the combination of two or more separately described sets of people and were typically combinations of two of the other most frequently studied populations.

Only three populations seemed to include agricultural communications industry (non-education) professionals, which suggests bridging the gap between research, education and practical applications of knowledge may require including industry professionals in research studies. Increasing the focus on agricultural communications practitioners as a research population will provide opportunities for instructors responsible for educating future professionals to examine and incorporate current practices into formal and non-formal curricula. In addition, giving practitioners a voice through research may facilitate increased interest and more positive perceptions of the role of research in applied agricultural communications (Miller et al., 2006).

The combined research and non-research structure of *JAC* provides resources for a variety of professionals in agricultural communications (ACE, n.d.), while findings of this study also indicate *JAC* may be meeting the expectations of a peer-reviewed, scholarly literature outlet needed to serve agricultural communicators in academia. Rowland (2002) outlined four primary functions of peer review, including publication of scholarly journal articles, submission of papers to conferences, publication of scholarly monographs, and award of research grants and contracts. In addition, the peer-review systems of various journals help establish the importance of papers, which guides readers' identification of the information most valuable to them (Rowland).

As a peer-reviewed publication, the current *JAC* structure serves one of the four primary functions of the peer-review process identified by Rowland (2002)—publication of scholarly journal articles—although publication of research is not the primary purpose of *JAC*. Research reported in *JAC* from 1990 to 2006 appears to be representative of the agricultural communications discipline and the peer-review process. In addition, publication of scholarly literature in *JAC* serves to disseminate current knowledge, archive disciplinary knowledge bases, control the quality of published information, and assign priority and credit to authors' work (Rowland).

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study provided insight into the use of *JAC* as an outlet for scholarly, peer-reviewed research articles. The design of the study limited the content analysis to the types of articles published. Future research should include analysis of the number of pages devoted to research in comparison to non-research articles, as this may be a better indicator of the emphasis placed on scholarly publication versus professional development. In addition, this study did not examine the usefulness of *JAC* to its contributing authors. Further research should be conducted to determine if contributing authors are using *JAC* as a tool for career advancement and at what stage in their careers authors are seeking publication in *JAC*.

To elaborate on the findings of this study, further research should be conducted to determine contributing authors' satisfaction with *JAC* peer-review procedures and clarity of the *JAC* peer-review process, as well as to determine how the research published in *JAC* may be better oriented with the needs of the non-education agricultural communication industry professionals. A comparison of *JAC* with similar journals in the field of communications also should be conducted to more broadly evaluate its role as a peer-reviewed publication. Finally, the research published to date in *JAC* should be compared with the 2007-2010 National Research Agenda for Agricultural Education and Communication to evaluate the directions that should be pursued in future research.

Keywords

Journal of Applied Communications, peer review, scholarly publication

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