
Editorial

ALT-J non-electronica

The ALT Executive Committee has discussed on a number of occasions the question of making *ALT-J* wholly available in electronic form on our Web site (at present only the editorial and abstracts of papers appear), and even of turning it into a full-blown electronic journal. I have gently but consistently opposed this move, on occasions to the intense irritation of some of my fellow members, and always at the risk of appearing to be a Luddite. Explicitly ('Who, if not we as learning technologists, should be in the forefront of the soon-to-happen electronic-journal revolution?') and implicitly ('It is estimated that within two years, paper-based journals will be considered the dinosaurs of the academic world'), I have increasingly come under pressure to accede to an apparently unstoppable, apparently imminent change in the method and form of scholarly publication. I set out here my reasons for my continued resistance.

I am not in principle against electronic journals (who could be?), nor in particular against that new breed of online journals which allow readers to comment on published papers, and for their comments to be read by everyone in what becomes a continuously updated journal. On the contrary, in theory at least, it makes eminent sense for readers' comments to be freely available, since this encourages real-time debate. I can also see the obvious potential in a multimedia journal format, one which allows video clips and sound files to be incorporated into contributions. And I am all too aware of the time-lag between acceptance of a submission for publication in a paper-based academic journal and publication itself, a span of time which in the case of some journals can be inordinate. This can not only be frustrating for an author (although in many cases, given the position of the academic goalposts, 'in press' is as good as a reference to volume and page numbers) but can also be a very real obstacle to acceptance – several times I have seen referees' reports stating that while a paper is publishable, by the time it appears it is likely to be out of date, and that the author would therefore be better off putting it up on his or her local Web site; advice, unsurprisingly, rarely followed until all else has failed because the publication would then not count in the next Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).

Yet while I am conscious of the advantages of an electronic, perhaps interactive, format for

academic journals, I am even more conscious of the disadvantages of publishing *ALT-J* that way – at present.

First, I am far from convinced that message trails left attached to papers published in online journals lead to worthwhile debate. I am a member of a number of mailing lists, and I see mostly unstructured garbage on all of them. There are sometimes pearls to be winkled out, and the lists can certainly be very useful if one has a query. In my 17 years of experience in regularly accessing (and for a time – as what we used to call Sysop – running) bulletin boards, I have learned that inveterate onliners love nothing more than to respond to a request for help, while those same people are often much less inclined to help if they have to write an answer on paper. Perhaps the fact that all members of a mailing list will be able to see the act of generosity encourages altruism. Nothing wrong with that, of course – the end justifies the intention, and if email leads to a helping hand, all the better – but the loss of control associated with unfiltered comments would, in my view, devalue our journal if it were to be allowed to go seriously down the online route, no matter how strict the review process for the papers themselves. And I would be against filtering readers' comments because it involves too much work, and in any event goes against the spirit of public online communication.

My second objection is based on my view (one no doubt shared by most ALT members), that it is important for our Association to have a journal of high academic standing. I do not believe (a view, I know, not shared by all ALT members) that, in the near future, electronic journals will be able to achieve such standing in spite of all the conferences and workshops on electronic journals currently being announced. This is an especially thorny problem for those of us who are interested in research into educational technology, since the authors of papers about educational technology are not, for the most part, professional educational technologists. Rather, they have applied such technology to their own academic disciplines, and indeed may encounter substantial difficulty in convincing their peers within those disciplines that a publication in the area of educational technology should count as being of value in RAEs (whatever forward-thinking academics may wish, and whatever Dearing may have to say on the matter). If we are to achieve high standing for our inter-disciplinary high-tech area of research, I believe that we are more likely to do so – paradoxically – by producing a traditional paper-based refereed journal than by taking a high-tech approach to scholarly publication.

With respect to the time-lag between acceptance and publication, in the case of *ALT-J* this is rarely more than four months (what takes time, as every journal editor knows, is the refereeing process), and I do not think that we should change our policy for the sake of those comparatively uncommon papers which are so time-sensitive that a few weeks make all the difference. True, we do lose something, especially in our field, by limiting ourselves to text and still images while the Internet can offer us sound and vision (if sluggishly), but here again I would apply the same argument about traditional standing in the academic community as a whole.

Many refereed journals, in all fields – including technological fields – now have their own Web site. Very few of those generally considered to be of high quality and importance allow the publication of comments by those who access the site. At best, one can email the Editor who might decide to post a message which appears to be vital. Furthermore, those

same journals publish only abstracts, editorials and, in some cases, news items – not the full text of papers. Their Editorial Boards have doubtless decided on this policy for much the same reasons as I have outlined above. In other words, I doubt whether the main reason is one of losing potential sales, since it would not be inconceivable to allow online access only to paid-up subscribers.

I can already hear my opponents. Why let the tail wag the dog? Why let traditionalists decree the format of our flagship publication? I am not ashamed to adopt a pragmatic standpoint here. One should of course distinguish between online versions of journals and genuinely interactive online journals, and it is to the latter that my objections are principally aimed. But even with the former, I would apply the same argument, the one which accedes to current attitudes to research publications within academia, as typified by the very word 'paper' for a published article. When those attitudes change (and, yes, they may change soon), so should we, but not before the change has become very clear.

I realize that this editorial will ruffle the feathers of some readers of this journal. Let them vent their anger by submitting a response here – or online in ALT-Electronica if possible publication on paper seems to them too old-hat.

Gabriel Jacobs