

Issues for the new *JMLA* editor

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(Drafted by Mark Funk & T. Scott Plutchak, incorporating comments from members of the *JMLA* Editorial Board and the MLA Board of Directors)

Scientific journals have been around for over 350 years, and are currently experiencing rapid evolution in format and purpose. At a 2015 conference on the future of the learned journal sponsored by The Royal Society, panelists agreed that the goal should be to move away from scientific publishing, and towards scientific communication.¹ As MLA transitions to a new editor of the *JMLA* and to a new platform, we have developed the following list of issues and recommendations. The initial draft was developed by Funk & Plutchak, refined based on comments from the full *JMLA* Editorial Board, and further refined based on discussion by the MLA Board of Directors at their meeting on August 31st, 2016.

Editorial Board Organization and Structure

Editorial Board

Journal editorial boards exist in a wide variety of sizes, purpose, and responsibilities and the *JMLA*'s has evolved over time, as each editor has made adjustments to suit their needs, priorities and preferences. The *JMLA* currently has senior editors, associate editors, series editors, and peer reviewers. There are 34 *JMLA* peer reviewers (still called editorial board members on the mast head), each serving a staggered three-year appointment as part of the committee appointment process. Senior, associate, and series editors have been appointed as needed by the editor.

We have concluded that using the standard MLA committee appointment process is not the most effective way for handling appointments to the various roles required for the journal. Moreover, it does not reflect best practices as identified by organizations such as The Council of Science Editors (CSE),² World Association of Medical Editors (WAME),³ and Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)⁴, which all provide guidelines for the proper roles of editors and editorial boards.

Going forward, editorial board members, assistant editors and peer reviewers should be selected by the Editor-in-chief (EIC) based on their suitability for the specific roles they are being asked to undertake. MLA members should certainly be encouraged to volunteer for these roles, and the EIC should take into account the opportunity for mentoring and training members who are less experienced, as well as taking advantage of the experience of those more seasoned when making appointments.

The primary function of the Editorial Board is to provide advice to the editor about the direction of the journal. Editorial Board members serve as advocates for the

journal, helping to identify and solicit authors, suggest potential theme issues and consult on ways to broaden the reach of the journal and to make it more responsive to its primary audience. Editorial Board members may be asked to review submitted papers when their particular expertise may be useful, but this is not their primary role. In developing the editorial board, the editor should consider the WAME recommendation of including one or more non-MLA members on the board. This is intended to strengthen the independence of the editorial board while adding to the breadth of perspectives that can be brought to bear. Editorial Board members should be appointed by the EIC for a specific term (typically 3 years), which may be renewed as long as the EIC and the board member feel that the relationship is effective.

Peer Reviewers

Peer review, although beset with many problems, still serves as a cornerstone in scientific publishing. Peer review requires both technical and communication skills that need to be acquired. It is frequently the case that MLA members appointed to the editorial board as reviewers through the standard committee appointment process have not had previous experience in doing reviews.

Most scientific journals develop a broad pool of peer reviewers who can be called upon depending on the expertise required. Steps have already been taken to expand the pool of peer reviewers for the *JMLA* and this process should be continued. It is critical that the EIC have a large pool of individuals with a wide range of experience to call upon for doing reviews. While most reviewers will be MLA members, the EIC may want to go outside the association membership to identify appropriate reviewers. Reviewers need not be appointed for specific periods of time but can be kept in the pool of potential reviewers as long as they and the EIC feel that they are making a solid contribution.

In order to develop reviewing skills, a training program must be developed. The 2016 annual report from the editor indicates that an online course was being developed to train reviewers. If possible, this should be completed and implemented. This course should be made available to all MLA members whether or not they serve as *JMLA* reviewers.

Since peer reviewers will not be appointed through the standard committee process, a mechanism for recognizing their contributions must be developed. Some journals, and many individual reviewers, are using Publons (<http://prw.publons.com/>) for this purpose. As another form of recognition, MLA's Academy of Health Information Professionals (AHIP) should consider awarding AHIP credit for *JMLA* article reviewing.

Assistant and associate editors

Throughout its history, each *BMLA* and *JMLA* editor has appointed section editors, associate editors, etc., in order to help manage the workload. This has generally

been effective, and in some cases, these individuals have served for many years very effectively. We anticipate that this will continue as the editors see fit.

Transition to the new structure

Given the number of individuals currently serving the *JMLA* in some capacity, we anticipate that the new EIC will work closely with the headquarters to develop a gradual transition to the new structure. The Board of Directors has agreed to make no new appointments to the Editorial Board for the upcoming cycle.

Issues recommended for consideration by the incoming EIC and editorial board

Balancing the interests of researchers and practicing librarians

The breadth and depth of medical librarianship is displayed quite vividly at our annual meetings. Both research and practice-based papers and posters are heavily attended. This mix of research and practice should also be reflected in the Association's journal. Publishing only research at the expense of practical articles is not fully communicating with the members. A major goal of the Journal is to help medical information workers make better decisions – whether they are researchers or “front-line” librarians. Editorial policies need to carefully and consistently address ways to achieve this balance.

Audience

While the primary audience for the *JMLA* remains MLA members, many articles published over the years have relevance for librarians outside of the health sciences as well as for individuals interested in issues such as scholarly communication, research reproducibility, data management, knowledge integration, bibliometrics, open access, and health professions education. The editor and editorial board should investigate strategies for reaching out to these audiences.

Transition to OJS

The Journal will be moving to the Open Journal Systems platform from the Public Knowledge Project, and the University of Pittsburgh will host it. This move to a new platform, which was built for e-journals, gives the Association an opportunity to explore new functions to expand the usefulness of the Journal. Open data and open peer review are just some examples. The editor will need to work closely with MLA headquarters staff and Pittsburgh's University Library System in order to take full advantage of what OJS can offer.

Open data policy

As librarianship becomes more evidence-based, data becomes more important. Access to the original data behind charts and tables is useful for readers looking to understand the research, validate the research, or replicate it in their own environment. The editor and editorial board should develop an open data policy in line with best practices being developed at other journals.

Open peer review

Many journals have tried to improve on the peer review process by implementing open peer review. Various levels of open peer review exist, ranging from naming reviewers, to publishing reviewer and editor comments, to placing an online “discussion paper” that is archived along with newer versions and reviewer comments as it evolves to a final version. Many see open peer review as offering benefits for authors, readers, and reviewers, as the process of scientific communication becomes transparent for all. The editor and editorial board should investigate options for open review based on effective models currently in place at major scholarly journals.

Relationship with the MLA Board of Directors

The issue of editorial independence is a bedrock principle for scientific journals and care must be taken to insure that the Board of Directors and Headquarters staff do not intrude in areas that should be within the purview of the EIC. These include (as noted in the job description) all decisions pertaining to selection of materials to be published (with the exception of certain items included by association policy). It is also important that the EIC and the Board have a good working relationship and that the Board be familiar with the EIC’s priorities for the journal. The EIC should be sure to keep the Board members apprised of major initiatives and should regularly seek their feedback and advice. The Board should be clear about their expectations for the *JMLA* and the EIC and develop a clear evaluation process.

¹ Gielas A. After 350 years of academic journals it’s time to shake things up [Internet]. theGuardian. 2015 [cited 16 August 2016]. Available from: <http://bit.ly/2bf9dPq>

² White Paper on Publication Ethics - Council of Science Editors [Internet]. Council of Science Editors. 2016 [cited 16 August 2016]. Available from: <http://bit.ly/2bvXUs>

³ Syllabus for Prospective and Newly Appointed Editors [Internet]. World Association of Medical Editors. 2016 [cited 16 August 2016]. Available from: <http://bit.ly/2bCNLZA>

⁴ Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors [Internet]. Rev. ed. Committee on Publication Ethics; 2011 [cited 16 August 2016]. Available from: <http://bit.ly/2bo2PWn>