

The *JCI*'s commitment to excellence — and free access

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Editorial

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The *JCI* has been published since 1924, and it has provided its articles online since late 1996. In the years afterward, online publication has been viewed by the journal and the leadership of the American Society for Clinical Investigation (ASCI, which owns and operates the journal) as an excellent means by which to disseminate the advances and insights published in the journal's pages to a wider audience, yet as an imminent threat to the financial stability of the *JCI* and the ASCI. With a few years' experience, the journal can now claim to have both benefited and suffered from the effects of unrestricted online publication. In mid-2003, the *JCI*'s online journal received an average of 20,000 unique visitors weekly, compared to only 2,900 visitors weekly in mid-1997; certainly, more, and more varied, readers are reaching the *JCI* than was possible with print alone. However, from 1996 through mid-2003, the *JCI* lost around 40% of its institutional subscribers; not only are fewer people reading the traditional print version, but fewer people have access to it, and print-subscription revenue, on which the *JCI* has depended, is no longer reliable.

The *JCI* might be seen as a victim of its own goodwill, but the shifting landscape of how science is communicated has not thrown the journal off its goal. The *JCI* remains a high-impact, well-respected journal, thanks in large part to an editorial board of peer scientists who are leaders in their fields and who have an eye for what others in their fields want and need to read: novel, rigorous research. The *JCI* has been able to turn technology to its advantage: in 1999, it became a self-published journal, and for several years it has used

web-based technology to conduct peer review and other aspects of its business, resulting in greater efficiency at lower cost. Most importantly, it has been shifting from a reliance on print-subscription revenue to author charges.

Presaging by a number of years some of the arguments put forward by the Public Library of Science (PLoS), one of several publishers promoting a model of open

access to scientific research, the *JCI* has seen author charges as one way — perhaps ultimately the only way — for all parties involved in scientific communication to ensure dissemination of research without burdening the public at large and institutional library budgets. Despite some internal hand wringing by leaders of the *JCI* and the ASCI, the journal has remained freely available online during years when it was practical and, presumably, critical to restrict online access — less because the *JCI*'s online readership was flourishing, but more because it was philosophically the right approach. PLoS has promised to transform the landscape of scientific publishing by producing a stable of open-access journals, the first to be published October 2003. However, it is important to note that the *JCI* was among the first journals to have a full-text online publication and among only a few that have held fast to maintaining completely barrier-free online access. (Conceptually kindred to the *JCI*, the *British Medical Journal* recently announced that the journal's years-long free online access was coming to a close (1) — a signal that for the *BMJ*'s economics of publishing, the traditional model of subscription fees has trumped technology.) There is likely a market for PLoS and other open-access publishers in archival areas of science where commercial publishers typically hold sway and where access is restricted. For the community of readers and authors that the *JCI* has served for well over three-quarters of a century, however, the *JCI* has held to its ethic of disseminating science, and it will continue to do so, all while continuing to grow with the marketplace.

A discussion of free or open-access publishing would be incomplete without attention to the issue of copyright. The PLoS has been at the front of the attack on the long-standing practice of authors being required to assign their copyright to scientific publishers; the main point PLoS makes is that most research (at least the research conducted in the United States) is supported in whole or part by US taxpayers, and therefore the public should not have to pay again, by subscription, to have access to it. In fact, the PLoS has hitched itself to the Public Access to Science Act, currently under consideration in the US House of Representatives, which

seeks to place into the public domain research supported in whole or in part by the US government. Additionally, the PLoS and other open-access advocates argue that the progress of science has been limited because publishers typically control copyrights and, because of this, access.

The spin of the debate has been adeptly controlled by the PLoS and others, but the argument is about matters effectively already resolved. The US government currently retains rights to research it has supported in whole or in part, and for the work produced solely by US government employees, there simply is no copyright they can assign. However, publishers currently may copyright public-domain works, provided they have added to the work – for example, by peer review and editing – and the Public Access to Science Act will likely have no effect on this other than adding a meaningless string of words to US copyright law. Lastly, the claim that science has been hindered by publisher control over copyright may be good media spin, but one would have to be actively avoiding the current state of science to believe it. (It perhaps need not be mentioned that US copyright law permits reproduction and distribution of published material for educational use, regardless of the publisher or its policies [ref. 2].)

The *JCI* has required, and will continue to require, that authors of works it publishes assign their copyright to the journal or inform the journal if they are US government employees, and the ASCI will continue to copyright material published in the *JCI*. This is generally not meant to control the distribution or circulation of articles published in the *JCI*, but to ease administration of the rights related to the published work – those who seek to reproduce material published in the *JCI* need only contact the journal for permission, rather than communicate with each and every author of an article. The *JCI* typically welcomes reproduction of its material, and authors and others may reproduce *JCI* articles in nonprofit venues without first requesting

permission from the *JCI*. However, the *JCI* will continue to require that permission be sought when reproduction is in commercial settings – a small acknowledgment that the communication of science is ideally a nonprofit enterprise, despite commercial publishers controlling the majority of the market and, also, being the source of many of the problems open-access advocates highlight.

The scientific community continues to endorse the traditional journal-centered method of communicating research results, despite technology that could easily produce alternate methods. Authors still submit their findings to journals, journals continue to vet papers, and readers continue to turn to journals as trusted venues. The technology linking author to journal to reader should be welcomed without hesitation, yet for many publishers, traditional economics puts the reader – the primary person of interest for the whole operation – almost too close. The question for many publishers is, How far can readers go before they're willing to pay to go further? For the *JCI* and others working to ensure access to scientific literature, the question is, How can journals bring readers in more closely? The financing having been resolved, through author charges and other means, the *JCI* hopefully can bring the greatest benefit to its authors and readers, regardless of who they might be. It is in this spirit that the *JCI* has always been free online, and will remain so.

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The American Society for Clinical Investigation

1. Delamothe, T., and Smith, R. 2003. Paying for bmj.com. *Br. Med. J.* 327:241–242.
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