Journal of Dairy Research

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Spreading the word in a post-Caxton era

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Editorial

Cite this article: Knight CH (2022). Spreading the word in a post-Caxton era. *Journal of Dairy Research* **89**, 119–120. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022029922000437

Received: 30 April 2022
Revised: 30 April 2022
Accepted: 30 April 2022
First published online: 31 May 2022

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The first twenty-seven years of my career were spent almost entirely in research, with teaching interactions restricted to postgraduate students and occasional guest lectures. Moving into a University teaching environment at Copenhagen was refreshing for me, and I greatly enjoyed nine years of fairly intensive interaction with students from Denmark and around the world. Setting up my office when I first arrived, I made a conscious decision to go 'paper-free', so the filing cabinets were discarded. My skill base let me down: I very often found it necessary to print out the document that I was trying to read online, so the absence of filing cabinets created significant work for the printer and use for the paper bin. Furthermore, whilst posting my lecture notes online for student consumption I soon became aware that there was considerable competition for the printers, so I was not alone in lacking online reading skills. How often do you receive an email that implores you not to print it as hardcopy unless absolutely necessary? Are you struck by the fact that eBooks, whilst popular, have not achieved the dominance over print versions that was predicted ten or fifteen years ago? There is something satisfying about holding and leafing through an actual book, a tangible thing that sticks in the mind, in contrast to the electronic lines that are all too often forgotten as quickly as they are downloaded. Reading for pleasure, I suggest, requires the input of a printing press. Forty years ago I read scientific literature for pleasure, looking forward to the new Journal volumes arriving on the library shelves, scanning through the contents and finding the time to read those articles which attracted my attention. Would I be able to carry on doing that today if I was still actively engaged in research? My guess is not! Quite apart from the time pressures that force younger researcher to focus heavily on acquiring the next dataset, it is increasingly unlikely that the volume would actually be found on the library shelf. The concept of having the information readily available electronically at your own desk or even simply in your own hand is extremely attractive, and published statistics suggest that it is effective. Metrics going back to 2016 are plotted for every article published in Journal of Dairy Research, and many have achieved 1000 or more views or downloads. I am particularly happy that many articles show a persistent accumulation of views, suggesting that they have an enduring quality. But does online publication encourage actual and thorough reading? As Editor I am probably one of very few people who reads every article that appears in our Journal, and in so doing I quite frequently find myself checking to see if a cited article actually does discuss what the citation claims it does. All too frequently, and regrettably, it does not. But now the confession: I generally do not check beyond the Abstract. Am I alone? Probably not! A fairly cursory analysis of our Journal metrics reveals a rather simple observation: for review articles the 'Full Text Views' and 'Abstract Views' are often not that dissimilar, whereas for research articles there is a strong bias towards 'Abstract Views'. This highlights the importance of the Abstract, but does more besides. Our Instructions for Contributors states: '*the Abstract should briefly explain what was done, why it was done, how it was done and what was found. Results and conclusions should be clearly stated, but the Abstract should not contain individual data values unless this is essential to the conclusions*'. In other words, we wish to inspire the reader to read the complete article. Further, we wish to make it easier for that to happen, so we strongly encourage brevity and conciseness. Our guiding principle is simple. Anyone who reads the article should become fully aware of what was done and what were the outcomes, but to acquire the level of detailed knowledge required to repeat the work (an essential tenet of scientific progress) the reader should expect to refer to a Supplementary File. Here, then, is another benefit of online publication. If you are holding a hardcopy Journal in your hand you want all of the information to be in the one place, whereas cross referencing becomes relatively simple when done online. For a quarterly Journal like ours, online publication offers a further advantage. Waiting for each issue to appear is often not necessary, as much of the content will appear in its final form as online First View Article well in advance of the hardcopy being prepared. Visiting 'the Press' (our publishers, Cambridge University Press) one can view an impressive display of printing equipment dating back hundreds of years (the Press was established during the reign of Henry VIII and published its first book in 1584, slightly more than 100 years after William Caxton first introduced the printing press into the UK). Hardcopy publishing continues to this day, including for the Journal of Dairy Research. However, we are perhaps reaching the point at which 'Online Only' becomes the optimum way forward if we are to serve our community of dairy researchers in the best way possible. Should we decide to go in that direction, it will be a carefully thought-out decision with publication quality remaining our paramount concern.

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In a typical month I probably receive in excess of a dozen emails inviting me to submit my research to one or another online publication, not bad for someone who no longer has a current research portfolio! Online publishing is all too easy (we have done it ourselves for our European projects), but it also all too easy to devalue the importance of the research by inattention to detail, shoddy peer review or editorial standards or failure to reach one's audience. As an author, you may rest assured that our Online standards are equally as high as our hardcopy standards have always been, and they will remain so going forward.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022029922000437 Published online by Cambridge University Press