The once and future editorial

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the changing nature of abstracts in scholarly journals, with particular reference to *Journal of Documentation*.
Design/methodology/approach – Selective literature review.
Findings – The nature of the editorial is changing towards a more stand-alone and substantive article.
Originality/value – The first discussion of the nature of the editorial in a scholarly information science journal.

Keywords Publishing, Editors, Academic journals, Scholarly publishing, Journals, Editorials
Paper type Viewpoint

As from this issue, *Journal of Documentation*, like other Emerald journals, will be using a new style of editorial. This will take the form of an extended commentary, and the format of an article, complete with abstract, keywords and references. This is not, in fact, so much different from what we have done in the recent past, but it is nice to establish it formally. And it seemed appropriate to use this first editorial of the new dispensation to reflect on the nature of the editorial itself.

My copy of *Chambers Dictionary* tells us that an editorial is "an article in a newspaper, written by an editor or leader writer". *Merriam-Webster* puts it slightly differently: "a newspaper or magazine article that gives the opinions of the editors or publishers". In an academic journal, such as *JDoc*, this is still a reasonable description, with the proviso that our publishers, to their credit, have never attempted to influence what appears in editorials; what the reader gets is the views of the editor, or whoever else may, on occasion, write the editorial.

In academic journals, however, things are somewhat different. Galbán-Rodriguez and Arencibia-Jorge (2014, p. 34) neatly summarise the nature of editorials in this context: "Editorials are brief overviews or commentaries on a specific topic […] These are usually written by the journal editorial and advisory team members, who reflect on selected articles of the same journal, or highlight problems of the scientific community".

One important distinction, of course, for editorials in academic publications is that they are not supposed to be opinion pieces; particularly so, the nearer one gets to the sciences, where personal opinion is supposed to play little or no part. Academic editorials tend to be more objective in intent. Often, they are little more than an introduction to the material in that issue. This style of editorial, often somewhat ephemeral and of doubtful value, is fast losing any purpose, as the idea of "issue" becomes increasingly meaningless, with the move towards immediate online publication of articles as soon as they are accepted. More substantive academic editorials tend to address an issue of the moment, which may or may not be reflected in the issue's material. Though an individual perspective, certainly, and a personal opinion, possibly, may be presented, the intention is to focus with a degree of objectivity on some substantive issue. This is the style of editorial to which *JDoc* has aspired in the past, and will focus in the future.

This change in the nature of the editorial is a general feature of academic publishing. The "traditional introductory journal articles, or neutral forewords, are gradually being

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transformed into several article types" (Galbán-Rodriguez and Arencibia-Jorge, 2014, p. 34), of which two types in particular can be distinguished. One provides commentary and emphasis on published material, typically in the journal issue to which the editorial pertains. This type is typically commissioned by the publisher, and has caused controversy on occasions, when it has been claimed that the editorial material has been influenced by sponsors or commercial agencies. The second is a development of existing knowledge, proposing some new perspectives or ideas. It is this second type which *JDoc* is adopting.

The fact that there is controversy about editorials remind us that editorials of the more substantive kind have considerable influence in terms of readership and citation (van Leeuwen *et al.*, 2013). This has led some publishers of subscription journals to make all their editorials open access, as a way of increasing publicity for, and impact of, their journals, also to concern for more open peer review than editorials generally receive (Galbán-Rodriguez and Arencibia-Jorge, 2014).

It is the tradition for the newspaper style editorial to be unsigned, so that it may seem to reflect the view of the publication, rather than that of the individual who wrote it. Some of the major scientific and medical journals, such as *Nature* and *The Lancet* continue this tradition, but they are now in a small minority. Many journals which used to have such a policy have moved to signed editorials in the interests of transparency, although some still argue for unsigned editorials to represent the "voice of the publication" and the views of all the editorial team, and supporting the (supposed) objective and impersonal values for which the publication stands (Smith *et al.*, 2006; Grant, 2010). So far as *JDoc* is concerned, our editorials have always been signed, and will continue to be so. I am not sure if there is such a thing as a "view of the publication" in our case, other than a belief in the value of academic study and research in the information sciences; anything beyond that is an individual perspective, albeit that it may be a widely held one, and should be acknowledged as such by identifying its author.

Having said that, the foci of editorials do differ markedly, even between journals seemingly addressing the same kind of audience and subject matter. A bibliometric study of the editorials in the leading journals of science showed that editorials in Nature focused to a large extent on general science policy issues, while those in Science more commonly addressed the political influence of scientists (Waaijer *et al.*, 2010, 2011). It would be an intriguing study to examine the editorials of academic journals within the information sciences to see whether the same differences in topic occur in our subject area.

Subject to any different focus for different journals, are there any points which make, in general, a "good" editorial? Little has been written about this, but Singh and Singh (2006) have taken up the challenge. They suggest that the main point is that it should express "a firm and balanced opinion on something"; balance is crucial, although this does not prevent an editorial writer "occasionally stirring things up, when such is the need". The editorial must express a viewpoint based on an objective analysis of evidence, must attempt to reconcile conflicting opinions, and must be contemporary without being populist. Whilst doing all this, it must be sufficient brief and pleasing written to hold the reader's attention to the end, so that the reader may feel "enlightened, or empowered, or helped in forming [their] own opinion".

Singh and Singh (2006, p. 17) conclude their analysis of what makes a good editorial, by suggesting that it should "express an opinion without being opinionated […] teach without being pedagogic […] transform without being evangelical

[…] engulf without drowning […] motivate to action without making [the reader] dictatorial […] enlighten without [being] dogmatic, prejudiced or egotistical […] and it should be brief". A challenging brief, but the new style of editorial in *JDoc* will try to live up to it.

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