Editorial

Reflections on the journey of editing a scientific journal

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In my first editorial, I stated my goals to implement changes that would disseminate JAMIA to a broader audience, expand its contents, and optimize its management. In my final editorial 8 years later, I share with you my journey toward accomplishing these goals.

In 1994, Bill Stead organized a group of senior American Medical Informatics Association (AMIA) members to found the Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association (JAMIA). Bill, the founding editor-in-chief from 1994 to 2003, is one of the pioneers of the biomedical informatics field and a recognized leader in the academic medical center community. As its first editor, Bill set JAMIA’s original vision and mission; he stepped down after a decade of service and at a stage when the journal was a recognized asset to AMIA and the informatics community in general. Randy Miller (editor-in-chief, 2004–2010) succeeded him, further advancing JAMIA’s mission and solidifying its status as AMIA’s flagship publication.

Eight years ago, when Randy passed me the JAMIA torch, he gallantly wrote “All’s well that ends well for JAMIA editors,” referring to the outcome of the search for his successor. I learned from Randy to be attentive to every single detail. (A hallmark of an editor-in-chief, in addition to setting up the vision and strategy for the journal, is the search for perfection. I found the best role models for this in Bill and Randy.) It was an honor to be selected for the role. I had been an associate editor for a few years, but I had not planned to be the editor when I first started serving as a reviewer. (When I was in graduate school, Ted Shortliffe taught me how to review a biomedical informatics article, and Mark Musen taught me how to write one. Bob Greenes ensured I did so while I was junior faculty at the Decision Systems Group, Brigham and Women’s Hospital, Harvard Medical School. I am lucky to have had their guidance and support for so many years.) I was ecstatic and somewhat surprised to have been selected, particularly because English is not my native language and I still had much to learn about editorial processes. I immediately accepted, having little time to reflect on what it truly meant to steer AMIA’s flagship publication, and how critical this role was for so many readers, authors, reviewers, and JAMIA’s editorial team. If I had thought too much about it, it might have been overwhelming, but being somewhat naive turned out to be an asset: I did not think at any single moment that I would not be able to do the job; I just did not know how much of my time it would consume, which innovations I would bring forward, and which barriers I would need to overcome. As with similar professional or personal challenges, this was one to be attacked head-on, with confidence, a knowledge-seeking attitude, humility, and pride.

In a “trial by fire,” I learned how to deal with extraordinary situations that took a lot of unexpected time, such as response to plagiarism, accusations of delivering biased or uninformed reviews, discovery of hidden conflicts of interest, authorship disputes, retractions, corrections, attempts to influence editorial decisions, and threats of lawsuits and retaliations. Fortunately, there are many sources of knowledge and support for many of these items, and the publisher’s and AMIA’s staff were always ready to help, so these temporary problems were overcome quickly. I learned to be efficient with time so my daytime job would not suffer from my dedication to JAMIA, and continued to improve my own writing for clarity, grammar, and style. I had the invaluable help from a technical editor: Dr Michele Day has provided insightful requests for clarification, suggested word replacements, and noticed lack of flow from paragraph to paragraph for most of the 60-plus “highlight” pieces and editorials. She taught me how to write better English (which may have resulted in better writing in Portuguese, too, but the hypothesis remains untested).

I started the online-only special issues of JAMIA, and later helped the journal “go green” at the same time we transitioned from a bimonthly to a monthly publication. Another innovation I introduced was the JAMIA Journal Club. The rationale was simple and timely. When I became JAMIA’s editor-in-chief, I had recently started a new biomedical informatics program at the University of California, San Diego, after spending many years as a faculty member in Boston’s Harvard–Massachusetts Institute of Technology system. Given the small size of our new program, I missed meeting with various colleagues in journal clubs and seminars. Additionally, I thought JAMIA could benefit from live presentations by authors of outstanding papers, and the virtual journal clubs would provide an open forum to discuss the latest informatics innovations, especially for informaticians who hold positions in institutions without training programs or academic informatics groups. With a live (and recorded) journal club, JAMIA could also be known to a wider audience that could “listen to” instead of read an article. For these
reasons, we started the monthly JAMIA Journal Club in 2012. The JAMIA Journal Club has been accomplishing its goals and is still ongoing because of the work of the student editorial board, which was another JAMIA innovation later replicated by other journals. However, this one I did not invent: I encouraged it to continue because it was a brilliant idea. Trainees could witness the review process as reviewers under the supervision of an associate editor, and understand the statistics and trends for the journal, thus cultivating a new generation of editors.

I thank all readers and authors of JAMIA, the AMIA staff, and publishers. I am especially thankful to the associate editors who served as student editorial board organizers, our current associate editors for their input in the directions of the journal and selection of peers for the editorial board, and all associate editors that have rotated in the position the past 8 years, including associate guest editors of special issues (there were 44 in total). They brought new themes to JAMIA, as well as new authors and perspectives that enriched our field. Their contributions helped JAMIA continue to stand out at a time when a plethora of new informatics-related dissemination venues emerged and there was great concern about the sustainability of traditional scientific journals. I will not name everyone here, as I am afraid of making a critical omission, but I would like to ask that our community keeps recognizing their efforts.

The editorial team is a secret sauce in running the journal: it is composed of AMIA members voted by peers as a result of a process that has improved over many years. The vote by the incumbent associate editorial team recognizes informaticians for being outstanding experts in their respective areas, as well as for their ability to review manuscripts fairly, insightfully, constructively, and in a timely manner; our authors and readers deserve no less. The editorial team helps ensure that our service to the scientific community is completed with utmost integrity and that it is inclusive, impactful, and impeccable. A key function of the editor-in-chief is to organize the team to achieve this goal. I trust that we were very effective at that, as can be shown by conventional and nonconventional measures of journal success; our team processed over 10 000 articles in the past 8 years, and we lowered the average and median times to first decision to under 30 days. Our articles have been read by millions of people worldwide, and we have received submissions from over 90 countries. We had millions of downloads and views, and the skyrocketing number of citations reflects the dissemination of informatics across many other disciplines. We achieved all this because we “stood on the shoulders of giants,” who made the journal an invaluable asset to AMIA and the informatics community at large, and because we kept improving on this legacy.

At the end of my second term, one thing is certain: time flies, whether one is having fun or not. In this case, I had lots of fun, and with the same blend of sadness, happiness, accomplishment, and anxiety I felt when I left my oldest son for the first time in daycare or when my youngest son departed for college, and I am passing the JAMIA torch to the new editor-in-chief, Sue Bakken. It is reassuring to know that the journal will be in great hands, as she is exceedingly qualified and will take JAMIA to new heights.

I thank you all for the unique opportunity to serve as your editor-in-chief for 8 productive and enjoyable years. Looking back, it was a lot of work, a lot of rewards, but, most importantly, a lot learned from people with so many different backgrounds, aspirations, beliefs, and goals.

REFERENCES