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Imagine anticipating the arrival of the next issue of a medical journal like you might the next *Style at Home*, *Car & Driver*, or *The Economist*; you know you're getting trusted, enjoyable, and relevant new material that feels like it knows you are reading. It's not just that you might come across a paper you ought to tuck into, but that the journal delivers an experience that feels tailored: delighted every time, pulling apart the plastic like it's your birthday, clutching and crumpling it to your breast, exalted by the prose. The hiss of vintage vinyl, a steaming mug of tea, a rain-stippled window, a rumor of eucalyptus in the air.

This journal does not exist. It makes nice fodder for a corporate vision statement (and an Instagram post), but it's impractical to conceive of such a niche product, and hubristic to think I deserve it. Neither though, is the expectation that interacting with the edifice of medical publishing feel coldly transactional, sifting and thumbing in hopes of a practice pearl, agnostic to its origin. This has been on my mind the past 18 months, and more acutely the past few weeks as I've pulled together a talk with the aspirational title of, "The perfect journal." What follows is a riff on what that might mean, or at least an attempt to taxonomize the building blocks.

But first, step zero: why a journal at all? Some people's monthly workflow includes methodically hunkering down with a brace of print journals, sure. But when the interface becomes an emailed table of contents or tabulated Google Scholar results, the scanning eye seeks the *papers*, not the journal as a tome. In this way, a hypothetical universal repository would suffice — papers posted online ad hoc after whatever review mechanism granted entry. Preprint servers, like *arXiv.org*, have served such a purpose in the physical sciences for years, and have made inroads with BiorXiv and MedRxiv. Wouldn't it be nice to unify formatting and file naming, and shed barriers to search and linking data during research?

A single interface sounds nice, but the lightened burden of usability is then offset with new cargo; vetting the veracity of the work and contextualizing its place in the canon. Peer-review is the best we've got to help ensure standards are met, and editorial commentary and invited review are extraordinarily helpful to guide how new work fits in understanding disease and its treatment. Urological communities and associations, stewards of the journals, would also lose a part of their persona and link to members and enthusiasts.

So then, what even is a journal in 2021? Is it simply a list of papers doled out monthly? I'd suggest not — the research papers themselves are surprisingly unlinked to any "identity" of a journal beyond the indistinct notion of prestige (a matter we've pondered).¹ New papers are rarely solicited; they are the work of researchers who, only upon completion, seek a venue. The choice of journal is often aspirational based on "impact" — more a question of, "Where can I get this in?" and less, "What is the best fit for this work?" This isn't a complaint; it's just acknowledging the universality of the science, and that it's not the place to define the perfect journal.

Let's define a journal in three spaces, and highlight some attributes that move the needle towards the ideal.

First, the journal has a purpose, affiliations, and services a certain readership. Its editorial slant is geared toward enlightening that readership, without alienating others. *CUAJ* aspires to relevance to Canadian urologists and urological specialists in their whole professional lives, as clinicians, academics, and educators. We hope that our output is informative to the international urological community as well, but we have a compass pointed home. The perfect journal has an *identity*, not just a ranking, and as such, can seek to serve its purpose.

Second, the journal has a set of operating principles and protocols in the service of its purpose, with an editorial board chosen not solely for clout, but for resonance with readers and an understanding of the *raison d'être*. The board should aspire to

reflect the readership demographically, as well as professionally. Editors should be experts, but not subject to the curse of knowledge — that unhelpful state when one can't conceive of others not being as facile in a subject as they themselves. Similarly, the journal has a peer-review process that is both thorough and timely, something critical in distinguishing it from the unvetted preprint servers and repositories imagined above. A journal's editorial flow from reviewers through editors should be replicable and predictable. Like referees and umpires in sport, the calls may not always be perfect or in your favor, but if they're consistent and honest, they reassure the readership and satisfy the authorship.

The perfect journal minimizes the friction of its interactions, from hoops of formatting at submission and author declarations, to clarity of email correspondence, facility of review sites, and timeliness of review. This occurs within the bounds of authors meeting reasonable expectations of formatting, of course, and creates the least administrative, fussy headaches for all. Moves toward "free format" submission are obvious, humane, and author-centered approaches that should be celebrated.

Also, in this more administrative stratum, is the access structure of the journal. Others have spoken wisely on both sides of the gated vs. open access debate. We are proud of our "diamond open access" format — no reader *or* submission fees — but also very fortunate in our support from the CUA. Others have very practical reasons for their access choices; the perfect journal aspires to mate its meters with its readership's ability to access it and hopes to minimize barriers.

The third layer is the experience of the user in interacting with the journal itself — the issues, the papers, and the editorial content. The researcher plunking into a paper via PubMed, by definition, is uninterested in cover art, editorials, and other front matter; but for others, these are the on-ramps and roadmaps to capture the attention, entertain, or enlighten about the in-group served by the journal. If the perfect journal aspires to serve a community, this is a lodestone of that relationship. The remainder of the user experience is really about design, that is the cover (see *JAMA's* old art pieces, *Urology's* selected graphics, or *CUAJ's* pithy stock photos and headlines); webpage navigation; composition of the electronic table of contents; and the data visualization, type, and layout choices of the papers. Each of these carries esthetic weight to lure and engage, and ought to place easy navigation and information extraction at the fore. The perfect journal aims to improve readability through both writing and design. Papers selected for their relevant content and published in their most readable edits should be the standard; quality science remains trapped on the page without attention to the extraneous load of clutter and opaque syntax.

So....we ain't perfect and neither is this taxonomy, I'm sure. The perfect journal is an abstraction in practice; in reality, it is a more perfect *experience* that we seek, and that journals should foster. These are individual joys, needs, and hopes. What I can say is that *CUAJ* and its team have their heads in the right place and a strategic plan that restates the above in our specific context. I hope this checklist provides a few navigational aids for others who aspire to better identify and serve their readers. A journal viewed this way is functionally an array of dials, each allowing calibration to more optimal settings. Plunking citable papers into PDF downloads is not the goal. Producing a trustworthy, low-friction, usable, and useful experience is a more perfect place.

Reference

1. Leveridge M. The minnow's lament or having impact with low impact. *Can Urol Assoc J* 2021;15:224-5. <https://doi.org/10.5489/cuaj.7512>

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