

In the name of God

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Editorial: The Challenges of Online Publication.

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When we started on 13 years ago as an electronic journal, there were only few such journals worldwide which were published in electronic only version. None of them were from Middle East. Today the electronic publishing has become more popular and the number of electronic only journals is escalating. The ease of this type of publication as compared to the hard copies, the lower costs, the much higher visibility and the speed of dissemination of the information have all made this type of publication attractive. As was said by Kassier 20 years ago, the purpose of medical journalism should be revealing not suppressing the information.¹ This is more plausible with electronic publication. The electronic publication makes the data more revealing and more accessible. This is of utmost importance for busy physicians who need information in timely manner during medical care or for health professionals working in the developing countries with limited access to standard libraries.

However electronic publication has its own challenges. Still many authors prefer to publish in hard copy journals, because they think it is more prestigious with higher chance of reputation. This results in more paucity of the high quality original articles in the electronic journals. In Shiraz Electronic Medical Journal (SEMJ) this was the case at beginning in the first 5-6 years. It took time to get the trust of the researchers to publish in this electronic journal. As the journal became indexed in well known international indexes like Scopus and many others (now indeed the journal is indexed in more than 50 databases and sites) the flow of the article increased dramatically. As the quality of original article papers are increasing, our early rejection rate has decreased dramatically. Currently we discard near 50% of received papers mostly due to our fixed number of articles per issue based on the policy of the supervisory committee of the research journals

at Iranian Ministry of Health and Medical Education.

The late and tardy response of reviewers is another challenge. Though this is not only for the electronic journals but it seems to be more prominent here. I had experience of being editor-in-chief in both electronic and hard copy journals and I can say at least some reviewers take the peer review request form the electronic journals less seriously than the same request from the old fashion journals.

The electronic publication provides many more opportunities and capabilities to the publisher than the hard copies, including better search options, use of multimedia and more colourful and detailed illustrations and presentation of the full data sets.² At SEMJ, we are planning to take advantage of the latest technology to catch up with today's e-publication. We believe these will make our journal more readable and more informative. One should not forget that these capabilities can not replace the originality and validity of the scientific articles.

Electronic publication also has the challenge of having stable, secure and easily accessible internet servers and management system including the essential space for archives with a stable address. We faced this problem at beginning but with strengthened infrastructures in our institution the problem have been lessened to a great extent. Some journals may use the commercial servers, but the problem of stability and cost are of concern. We have been using the commercial service providers for mirroring and to increase our visibility but for the sake of

stability our main site is hosted by the server of our institution, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences and we found this policy of importance to have a continuous uniform presentation in the web.

Another advantage of online publication is easier editorial tasks, especially with the use of an integrated publication program. Through this program the editors can manage and monitor the whole process of peer review and publication with much ease, better quality, fast speed and lower costs. Monitoring of pattern of online use can also give the editors a view of the readers' choice, for instance, through monitoring the number of visitors to each article.

One of the challenges in the past was how to cite an article form an electronic journal. This is now standardized but still there are some pitfalls. Indeed online citation with a direct link to the cited articles has made the online citation more effective.³

Despite of all advantages of electronic publication, one should remember the importance of differentiating between peer reviewed and 'gray articles'. Besides, there are some futile electronic journals which are not using standard protocols in peer review and editing. This has produced a mass of large information in the net without scientific basis which could be misleading to some readers, especially nonprofessionals. These sites have polluted the environment of electronic publication. One of the reasons of less desire to publish in electronic journals might be related to this environment. Absolute adherence to standard peer review process is the only way to avoid this hazard. Current appearance of

the standard electronic journals in the well monitored indexes is a good criterion for distinction of those unscientific journals from standard ones.

In conclusion, electronic publication has expanded in past decade with an enormous rate. There would be much more electronic publications in coming years. The lessons learned in establishment of journals like ours, might help others to have a better organization of electronic

publication. The organizations devoted to medical and scientific publication should have more pivotal role in this regards.

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