

What is the function of a journal?

Why do we read journals? Has their time come and gone? Are hard copy journals moving into the classic car arena? Do we look at a journal volume with wistful memories of yesteryear, like looking at an old MG sport car, or even a gracious and handsome old Jaguar? Pondering on the dichotomy between owing a piece of history with manually assembled machinery, and the ease and practicality of driving a new car with auto-headlights and heated seats can tear the heart and the mind in separate directions.

On a daily basis, I look up individual articles using PubMed or even just plain Google. I am lucky to be a staff member of an academic teaching hospital; our library offers access to almost all of the manuscripts that I might require. All of these access requests are electronic, and the papers are electronic. So are the days of hard copy over?

When faced with this question, like so many research hypotheses printed in our Journal, the answer is not simple. One size does not fit all. If I need quick access to a paper and a synopsis of the results, I am quite happy reading it in soft copy. If I am accessing multiple papers and comparing the results, or just looking for the more comprehensive studies and results, hard copy is the preferred route. Soft copy allows me to formulate a decision on the basis of the most up-to-date information. It is instant, comprehensive and effective. Hard copy allows me to digest the paper's message, read it over and over or even keep it as a study aid for the future.

Van der Vleuten's index comes to mind (Van der Vleuten, 1996). In his research he postulates that the utility of any assessment (in his case, the assessment of professional development) is a product of the reliability, the validity, the educational impact and the acceptability, all divided by the cost of the intervention/assessment. As a teaching exercise in quality improvement, I often use the null hypothesis argument with this equation; if any of the factors tends towards zero, the whole equation tends towards zero. So clearly the use of soft copy resources fulfils all of the necessary criteria in a positive way, making the whole equation positive and the experience worthwhile.

On the other hand, when I want to read some papers and reflect on their contents, I like to print out the paper and bring it home to sit by the fire, giving me time outside a busy office to ruminate on the contents. If I am writing a manuscript, I like to have hard copies of the references stacked somewhere in the office. I still have copies of the reference material from my thesis nearly two decades ago. Why do I keep them? Well the content does not go out of date in many of these papers and I find the process of re-sorting them or tidying them up re-ignites the subject material for me.

Myrberg and Wiberg's (2015) synopsis presents interesting comparisons of paper and electronic teaching resources identifying that most participants preferred reading hard copies, but that either approach yielded similar learning effects.

When it comes to the practicalities of the editorial role, one of the key checks that we perform on every manuscript is the accuracy and completeness of the reference citations (you would be amazed how many times that they are incomplete). I print out the manuscript for this purpose. I find it easier to get the flow of an argument when checking the accuracy of the language and the correctness of reference listings at the same time.

So for acceptability and for reliability, Van der Vleuten and his equation are strongly positive with a minor increase in cost.

Hospitals around the world are rushing headlong (at different paces) towards electronic health records. The holy grail of computerised medical notes is seen as a solution to all of



our problems. But as you, our readers, repeatedly testify, this solution only uncovers other problems.

Electronic publishing was heralded as the death sentence for the printed word. Book shops were slated for closure and even extinction. Yet book sales are up. The tactile feel of a book (or an Emerald Journal) has a wonderful and indescribable quality to it.

So the null hypothesis is not proven for Van der Vleuten and his index. But strategic decisions have to be made. We will now be publishing articles as soon as they are accepted and typeset. Will hard copies be around in a decade? Who knows, but it is an interesting question for researchers to reflect upon.

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References

- Myrberg, C. and Wiberg, N. (2015), "Screen vs. paper: what is the difference for reading and learning?", *Insights*, Vol. 28 No. 2, pp. 49-54.
- van der Vleuten, C.P. (1996), "The assessment of professional competence: developments, research and practical implications", *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 41-67.