
EDITORIAL POSTLUDE

HERBERT JACK ROTFELD

Parting Perspectives from an Aging Editor (& thanks for all the fish)

Unlike the dolphins in Douglas Adams' *Hitchhikers' Guide to the Universe* who originally expressed the parenthetical phrase of the title, the editor is not deserting the planet. But becoming a non-editor means a departure from a special world that filled so much time for so long. And after a long academic life including over 35 years of membership in ACCI, one gets a skeptical perspective to hear young scholars confidently predict the future of consumer issues, which in many ways looks like the past.

In the prior editorials, some readers were offended, others were inspired and some wondered from where the ideas arose. Many times I thought I had composed something of rousing provocation, only to be greeted by a collective yawn, while reactions to the more numerous expressions I considered mundane generated strong reactions from people saying that it is "unnecessarily" controversial. Yet, how can any scholar in this field be satisfied with the predictable, mundane and uncritical. Past editorial punditry, the product of the editor's job as itself being a scholarly endeavor, produced perspectives on a plethora of practices. Reading thousands of research manuscripts provides a different type of personal research.

This time its about me. The public events during my life are significant not for their public importance, but for providing key points of irony or inexplicable idiocy that remain burnished into top-of-mind awareness.

A Personal History

Each generation likes to think that it lives in a unique time, as they impose views of the current years on the situations long past. But somehow, in some ways, things do not change all that much.

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When I was born, “prescription drugs” as we have come to know them today did not exist. A physician could write a prescription, but the prescription was not a prerequisite for buying the drugs. Today, many drugs sold only behind the pharmacist’s counter moved there for reasons unrelated to patient protection, such as goals of “protecting” the public from drug abusers, regardless of the consumers’ legitimate need for low-cost and easy-to-purchase relief from allergic reactions.

In that same far-off year of my birth, my home town had six daily newspapers and five television stations, though none of my relatives owned a TV; all television was black and white and no politician had ever used it for campaign advertising. Network radio drama and comedy programs were the popular evening entertainment for everyone and a powerful advertising medium. By the time I started school, or maybe even before, people predicted that television would bring culture to the masses—as also was later said of the Internet, which I guess was true, but not *the culture* that anyone expected—while it was also predicted that all radio broadcasting would soon end due to a lack of audience. Of course, radio did not die, but it did have to change its business model.

When I was in grade school, President Eisenhower expressed concern that the youth of the day were becoming fat and lazy (though not in those words), which led to an annual national physical fitness test for schools to administer to children. Illinois, and only Illinois, responded with a state-wide requirement for all students in grades one through college sophomore to take a daily class in physical education. No one back then talked of concerns for childhood obesity, but the decades of a national annual physical fitness test did not seem to have any effect, later becoming a part of education apparently left behind when considering no child left behind.

In that same period, the U.S. Congress and some state legislatures held hearings in contemplation of banning comic books as harmful to young people, for the same reasons as was done a couple decades later by Congress and regulatory agencies regarding child-oriented television, and ongoing today with a parental focus on the Internet. The puppet host of a popular children’s program spawned a craze for Howdy Doody dolls that broke all sales expectations as one of the first major children’s television program tie-ins. This prompted the show owners to create another character of an Indian princess with a focus on making a similar product for girls. For adults, prime time television advertising filled about 8 or 9 minutes per hour, in commercial breaks falling every 15 minutes, versus 18 or more minutes per hour today in breaks every 10 minutes.

Noted mid-century adman and business iconoclast Howard Luck Gossage assailed boring endlessly-repeated advertising as a multimillion-dollar sledgehammer used to sell an economy-sized thumbtack, “Good for shooting fish in a barrel, but fish are learning to swim faster and are developing armor plate.”

When I was in high school, an Alabama governor of the state in which I now live famously fought to retain a segregated school system, and businesspeople were heard to refer to the hiring of black people in white-collar jobs as “charity work.” (To my own cringe factor, it was not so long ago that a department leader on my campus said this same thing to me.) During my high school years, color television became more common, but was still relatively slow to become accepted, such that many commercials were still in black and white, even when a program the messages interrupted was broadcast in color. Few people owned, much less listened to, an FM radio, except my dentist who played mind-numbing faux classical music while he drilled away with the gusto of the character later played by Steve Martin in the “Little Shop of Horrors” movie. Hispanic-oriented television and radio stations carried many advertising campaigns for distilled liquor products such as brand-name vodka and gin, though stations with more “mainstream” audiences did not. It was during this period that Bill Cosby was the first African American to receive an Emmy award for Outstanding Continued Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role in a Dramatic Series, saying in his acceptance that he wished to “thank CBS for having guts” to cast him in the role, since there were no other black actors in leading roles in dramatic series when “I Spy” went on the air.

When I was in law school, General Mills announced they would not buy advertising time on the then-new television program M*A*S*H since it was offensive and contrary to their family values. A petition was made before the FCC to ban all child-oriented advertising as harmful to young people, as some parents today would like to see a similar effort to ban computer advergaming (Quilliam et al. 2011). Richard Nixon’s advertising campaign for president presented him as the law and order candidate, so I was told that if I voted for the Democratic candidate instead of Nixon, there would be widespread corruption in the White House and we would be embarrassed internationally with a defeat in the Vietnam War.

When comedian George Carlin died, many television and radio stations included his “seven dirty words” you cannot say on television comedy routine in their obituaries. While the routine provided the basis for a 1978 Supreme Court case that affirmed the government power to regulate “indecent” broadcast material, one could not help but notice that when

he died in 2008 the stations did not *bleep* parts or all of some of those seven words.

Skepticism and wariness on anyone's predictions from the future are a natural result of a life covering this period.

As a lifelong hypochondriac, an interest in consumer protection was a natural direction for my research interests in graduate school. Kim Rotzoll and Ivan Preston provided a first contact with both *Journal of Consumer Affairs* and the American Council on Consumer Interests. At my first ACCI conferences, I dined in the company of Dick Morse and Bob Herrmann, and was impressed by the breadth of academic backgrounds of people on the program.

An Editor's Journey

Truth be told, *JCA* was not the first research journal where I applied to be editor. After interviews, or applications rejected without interviews, word kept coming back that I "had good ideas but scared people." One association's publication committee member unexpectedly asked if I could take over for their editor who was selected over me as "the safe choice" the year or two before; he had proved to be costly in his deadline-impaired inability to put out the product. But by then I was about to be announced as the incoming editor of *JCA*, which in retrospect was a much greater opportunity.

My multiple editorial terms encompass a period long enough for some faculty to go from first publication to full professor. *JCA* experienced many changes of growth during that period, too. The editor tried many experiments. Most were a success, though some were experiences from the school of unintended consequences.

Turn the clock back a decade.

The journal cover of my editorial predecessor, Claudia Peck-Heath, listed a diverse collection of associate editors. Whether her intention or an unintended consequence, this group also served as ambassadors and publicists for the journal to a variety of disciplines. The journal started to regain visibility with scholars in marketing, journalism and mass communications. The quantity and variety of submissions were growing (see James and Cude 2009). I ended the use of associated editors in an effort to shorten the time taken for reviewing manuscripts, an important concern and difficult to execute since electronic contacts were barely starting a decade ago. And it was always my desire to be the journal's traveling representative to conferences and programs for emerging scholars.

Toward the end of the last century, many people were paying special attention to a collection of publications that provided a compendia of all academic journals, Cabell's directories of publishing opportunities. Organized as a guide for scholars, the different books were intended as nothing more than a broad writer's market list, providing information on possible publication outlets by listing their technical requirements, contact details and so on. Similarly, "Writers' Market" books had long been available for aspiring magazine writers, so this was an academic writer's version. For one minor item of information on each publication, a single line provided an indication on how readily the journal accepted articles, using a number referenced as the publication's "acceptance rate." This number, an editor's unaudited estimate of how many papers of those submitted every year eventually get printed, by 2001 had become twisted into an academic administrator's easy-to-use indicator of journal quality. A lower number meant they were more discriminating in what they accepted, or so the users of this number presumed.

Left unmentioned was that this number was never checked for accuracy. Though becoming a standard, it lacked standard methods for editors to use in its calculation. Thus, the temptation was strong for any editor to simply invent the lowest number possible. Many probably did. As a more practical matter, I never met an editor who accepted bad papers to fill an issue or rejected good papers for space, making the acceptance rate nothing more than a statement of how many bad or editorially inappropriate submissions they receive. As I have told doctoral students or young faculty in recent years, if you want to improve this bogus quality rating at a journal where your article is accepted, tell all your friends to send the editor their worst work, with the expected rejections lowering the acceptance rate of the journal.

Yet with a new editor's naive eye to the *JCA* acceptance rate, shortly before I started to actually solicit and review manuscripts, I brashly said that I would double the number of submissions received every year. As it happened, that was done with ease. The unexpected discovery, however, is maintaining a desired number of acceptable quality papers required continuous missionary work to conferences and campuses. That was an enjoyable part of the job. But it also meant there were more papers that the editorial board had to review and reject, as the number of submitted papers inappropriate for *JCA*'s editorial mission also increased.

The lesson from the school of unintended consequences was that a bigger submission pool also means more problems with bad papers. To my surprise, too many aspiring authors never read the journals before

submitting a paper (Rotfeld 2005), though I knew before that many authors did not read the articles they cite.

For my first term as editor, *JCA* was still “self-published” by ACCI with contributions from an editor’s home university. Since 1967, as was common for association-owned journals in the twentieth century, the publication was a benefit provided to ACCI members, for the most part funded by organization dues. The editor’s staff did all of the editing, correcting and copyediting of each issue, with University of Wisconsin Press printing copies that were mailed to subscribers. Individuals subscribed by being members, while libraries would subscribe by paying a much higher fee as ACCI’s institutional members. However, membership was falling. Libraries were dropping subscriptions for journals of all types, and as an inter-disciplinary journal with fewer departments claiming it as a primary publication of the field, ACCI had difficulty remaining a priority purchase.

The editor and Executive Director of ACCI did what we could to encourage distribution, such as contacting authors to be sure their campus libraries included *JCA* in their collections, but it was a losing battle. This was outside our expertise. At the same time, the world of academic publishing had long since started to change. Commercial publishers were creating new refereed journals, serving the growing number of educators who needed to publish journal articles to retain their jobs. However, association-owned journals remain as the higher prestige publication outlets, both then and now. This provided an opportunity for many academic associations entering into partnerships with commercial groups that would produce and sell the final product to libraries around the world.

My concern was more of a legacy. I had published in *JCA* long before I was editor, so regardless of the job, I had a stake in the long-term health and visibility of the journal. I pushed the Board of Directors to change the journal’s business model. Understandably, they were resistant to change. One publisher’s representative, Harry Briggs, provided important assistance educating the association leaders on the benefits of a new approach to publication such that I am forever grateful for his strong work, even though the company he represented was not selected as *JCA* publisher.

My original goal sought to build library distribution, with concurrent visibility for scholars. As another lesson from the school of unintended consequences, Wiley provided extensive worldwide sales, Internet distribution, an electronic platform for back issues, as well as a significant source of income for the association. The change of the business model

for publication was a success, albeit both different and greater than originally expected.

Thus, some changes are planned, while outcomes are unexpected. Some outcomes are part of the plan.

In the 1990s, the editor of a struggling marketing journal invited the person he called a “popular provocative scholar essayist” to be a contributing section editor for commentary. The logic was that the punchy short works would attract readers, which could attract other readers and their research submissions to the journal itself. And it worked. Special sections and commentary bring in new readers, which in turn engender still more submissions. So for the same reasons that I was associate editor of that journal, for *JCA* I wrote editorials, solicited commentary, and hired good associate editors, Marla Royne and Brenda Cude, to bring in scholar-attracting work for the Bits, Briefs and Applications section.

More acceptable submissions eventually allowed expanding the publication frequency to three times a year, with an eye to becoming quarterly in the near future. Special issues dedicated to important topics become possible with more frequent publication, while the special issues themselves spur additional submissions on the topic as scholars discover *JCA* as an outlet for their work. Commentary articles, editorials and short applied articles have become among the most cited (and downloaded) *JCA* content, as the journal’s first editor Gordon Bivens seemed to presciently expect in his comments on the journal for the ACCI’s oral history interviews (Merchant 1987).

The Journey’s End

The temptation was strong to say yes when the association’s president asked if I wished to serve another term as editor. But it is the association’s journal, not mine, and it is time for someone else to try their own new ideas or test different experiments.

I could never understand editors who would view the work as nothing more than “managing a process.” Day-to-day work of the review process always provided the least interesting part of the job for me, regardless of the quality of the graduate student assistants drafted to help, but I never saw that as more than a small fraction of the work. Many phone calls were logged with authors in the final stages of papers, as I explained my own directions on improvements to maximize chances of the final product being both read and cited by others in the field. The most entrancing aspects of the work involved advising authors or otherwise paying attention to the many details of a publication for which, as I was always conscious, displayed my name on the inside cover. I have lost

count of the “meet the editor” sessions at conferences, doctoral student seminars or special programs at universities I attended. Detailed letters were written from both rejections and acceptances, and the resulting hate mail was minimal.

My friend Ray Taylor’s introductory comments for my presentation at Villanova University noted that I was often seen in the hallways at conferences in what he described as “holding court” with young faculty. Some of it involved giving suggestions on manuscript drafts, or guiding research suggestions, though other times I was just talking on all sorts of topics. Of course, Ray admits that I did this before I was editor. Jef Richards observed my endless vocalizations as exhibitions of my massive mental compendia of trivial information. My faculty positions never included association with a doctoral program, and the journal provided a special opportunity—or maybe just an excuse—for me to enjoy more of these types of contacts.

During the past decade, many new things were tried as an experiment of one sort or another, usually with a second plan underway in case things failed. Happily, almost all experiments were a success, sometimes with fortunate additional lessons from the school of unintended consequences. Luckily, the failures are known to almost no one. And the tales of positive changes could go on much longer, adding to this already too long comment on life and work.

The next editor, Sharon Tennyson, is now toiling away for putting out her first issue in 2012, as I was in a similar position in 2001. You can judge whether or not I am leaving the journal any better off than I found it. Whatever I did not accomplish, I am certain Sharon will step in to patch over any mistakes and nudge things forward.

For myself, I am grateful for the opportunity.

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