

Editorial

ACTION RESEARCH AND THE ON-LINE COMMUNITY

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Back in 1998, when the *Ontario Action Researcher* began as an “on-line” journal, publishing a periodical in this format was probably considered a jolly novelty by most of academia. It certainly was for me when I signed on as an editor in 2001. Since then I have become acutely aware of the virtues and vices, strengths and shortcomings of communicating with people on-line.

Of course, when I first took on this job, I was as giddy as William Caxton finding his first printing press. I had stumbled onto a new medium that reduced costs of publishing to almost nothing, with little need of capital investment or paid distribution, and thus seemed to herald the end of the monopoly of a small cabal of printed journals. It meant that lone writers could get their ideas and research out without the need of such heavy gate-keeping. No longer could a small set of academics with entrenched views of research and reality bar researchers with different views or who happened to be out of the echelons of higher learning.

This new medium also meant that ideas from a small journal in Ontario could indeed circle the globe, affecting people in places that the OAR's creators couldn't even image. Because subscription was free, it was a truly egalitarian work, and because it appeared on this interconnected web, all readers were merely a click away from any article they wished to read. This was information broadcasting beyond my wildest dreams and could be much more influential than the printed journals in which I had previously published. It was truly Marshall McLuhan's prophecies come to life in a positive way!

So much for my initial romantic visions. What reality have I had to face since my initial euphoria? A lot of drudgery, some despair and a great deal of oblivion mixed in with the occasional joy of the position.

The harsh realities of on-line communication and publication were driven home to me shortly after I became Editor-in-Chief. As I mentioned in the preceding editorial, all financial stakeholders save Nipissing had cut ties with the OAR by 2001. I was actually glad of this: by procuring a university as the sole benefactor, I felt the journal could maintain its unbiased, objective, academic status. The university provided the web-space and a web-master to place material on the site. However, as submissions and subscriptions began to roll in, the work began to pile up. I knew that the journal needed a coordinator to carry on the multitude of small businesses that needed to be done. To accomplish this, I spoke with the Vice-President of Academic Affairs. At this time, the person in the position came very much from the “old school”. After I sent him a lengthy memo of the situation, scheduled a meeting and spoke to him at length about the journal and its needs, his first comment stunned me.

“It's not a blog, is it?” He stated sternly, “I don't think we should even be allowing this thing on our website if it's just a bunch of opinion pieces”.

Mortified, I assured him that this was not a blog, that it was a peer-reviewed journal. It was now that it hit me. Although I had sent him the information and the website link, he had merely taken a cursory glance at the page, if that.

This is something that I have since come to appreciate about “the academy” since I began working on-line. There is a tremendous bias against the on-line format from the outset. When readers crack open a traditional paperbound journal, they may agree or disagree with the findings of a specific article, but rarely do they bring the trustworthiness of the entire journal into question. Instead, they usually have great faith that the work has been scrupulously vetted and that what is being read is the flawless pearl of the treasure trove of research that had been submitted. In the back of the readers' minds is the unspoken law of

supply and demand. Only a certain number of words can appear in the journal, and it is regulated by a small, crack-team of editors and reviewers.

However, when it comes to an on-line journal, people do not inherently trust it. An infinite number of words can be used in an infinite number of articles in each issue. Again, based on the laws of supply and demand, words in this format are no longer at a premium – in fact, writing (like talk) is cheap in this situation. As well, because there seem to be literally millions of other sites, a top flight journal can be squeezed side by side with a “rant” site. This is like having no municipal building codes – a tar paper shack could be thrown up beside a pink palace and nothing can be done about it.

It seems, therefore, that simply due to its medium, on-line journals are somehow considered less reliable, less valid, and something that cannot be depended upon. In reality, of course, it makes the reader play a more discriminating and active role in the process of journal selection and comprehension. But who wants to invest such time and effort?

So, the Vice-President began our meeting with a certain bias. This did not change with my prose on the subject. Once I explained to him my need, he casually argued that journals should be self-sustaining or profit-making. Wasn't that what journals were supposed to do? How could I argue with this logic? He had touched upon the other key aspect of journal economics. If subscribers weren't paying for a service, then it was expected that it mustn't be worth anything. Again, many readers will fall back on the security that they *expect* to pay large subscription fees to paper-back journals. Does that not show that these works are superior purveyors of research and knowledge?

Of course, what subscribers are really paying for is the cost of printing and paper. I would think that most editors will not retire on the proceeds from a paper journal. As well, you probably won't see too many Bernie Madoffs in the academic periodical world absconding with the entire bankroll of a journal and escaping to Fiji. However, the tactile nature of the journal gives the reader the feeling that they are paying for something concrete, something that will withstand the test of time. On-line journals are seen more as something that will dry up and disappear tomorrow with the next power outage. It makes the paying readers constantly feel at the back of their minds that they are being somehow cheated or shortchanged. An on-line journal issue does not seem “of this world”.

In the end, I was not able to convince this Vice-President of the worth of an on-line academic journal, based on the knowledge alone it provides (minus paper and ink). Like most, he could not see the value in this “flash-in-the-pan” scheme of on-line journals (like telephone, radio, and television, I guess). Thankfully I have been able to convince proceeding generations of V-Ps of its importance.

What this encounter did teach me, however, is that to exist in the world of academic journals and be taken with any credibility, an on-line enterprise must work harder than paper periodicals to establish its name and reputation. It may be almost impossible to shake the stereotype of being “sloppy”, and “unreliable”. However, as slow as it may be to get them out the door, each issue must be as peer-reviewed and visibly polished as a paper journal. The journal's articles must also have as much or more credibility than its counterpart.

The articles in this issue know quite well of what I speak. While they do not deal with on-line journals (outside of the OAR, of course), they face the challenge of being taken seriously while engaging in what was once face-to-face business. They must deal with many stakeholders that are unwilling to change traditional methods, and with others who carry biases on their sleeve. In our first action research study of this issue, *Taj Reel*, a vice-principal of a British Columbian middle school, explores the use of technology for curriculum development and professional development by teachers. *Lara Doan*, from the University of Windsor, examines how the use of electronic technologies has come to be not so neutral in its application. Finally, from a Victoria school district, *Crystal Kerr* looks at how an online community continues to develop in her area.