Editor? Me? C'mon!

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Please don't ever ask Val or me at the same time how we ever got into our Mom-and-Pop Journal routine. No marriage is strong enough to settle an argument like that. But we did last for three crazy years of the Journal, and the Discussions after that.

The Journal had been "developing," as they say:

- Boldly improving quality by turning down more papers, even as the supply of papers seemed to be drying up.
- Working to expand purview by that ever-useless device of appointing lots of big names to the Editorial Board.

So by the time we started to receive manuscripts in April, 1977, we had ten usable manuscripts received in January and February together and another eight that came in March. Faced with literary anorexia, the least we could do was move what came in FAST.

- Office at home to allow us both to work all hours.
- Correspondence through a 24-hour P.O. Box to save a day or two on deliveries.

I would pick up and drop off stuff at the P.O. going and coming (by bike) to and from the NIH, take new manuscripts to my office, read them (as I was to read every manuscript that came in during those three years), figure out what were the questions to ask about each paper, find referees by phone over the next few hours, compose letters to the reviewers, then hand the package over to Val to send out, to keep track, to read at some stage for clarity. We still sometimes call that room in our house, now occupied by a lively nine-year-old, "the Journal office."

It was good training. I learned to get the idea of just about any paper in "biophysics." We learned how to move a paper from initial receipt to first response to the authors within six weeks. I made myself read everything carefully and write every author a real letter on his paper. Val, an ex-lab technician and instructor in comparative literature, mastered the jargon and became English teacher to a surprising number of authors.

My strongest memory of those years was of Saturday mornings, lying on my back, reading reports and writing a dozen or so "verdict" letters while a two-year old sat patiently on my stomach waiting to go to the zoo.

Papers really began to come in. There was work to do and there were good people who did it. Toni Scarpa and Charlie Bean, Associate Editors, worked harder and harder. And the Editorial Board slowly became more useful as the symbolic appointees retired and we brought on people who were really needed for the papers that were coming in. Charlie Bean and later Art Brill, were the first two of the fine Associate Editors appointed by the Division of Biological Physics (DBP). There was once a rumor that the DBP came on the scene because it threatened to start a competing journal. There was an argument against a DBP component to the Journal on the grounds that most of their members already belonged to the Biophysical Society who owned the Journal anyway. In my opinion, whatever the reasons, any arrangement that sent us Charlie, Art, and their successors was worth making.

So we grew, despite all the good advice of Committees and Councils, mainly I believe because we ran the Journal as authors and reviewers would like to have a journal run. Val kept a sign on the wall: SCIENCE FIRST. That went for everything from grammar to anyone's inconvenience.

I have noticed, and still do notice, a "we/them" attitude by Committees and Councils when they are running a meeting or a publication for their colleagues. I know how depressing it can be wasting time in one of these groups instead of doing firsthand science. Still, a surprising number of people do seem to enjoy it. In any case, there's never reason to treat authors–and Editors–as nuisances or employees. One of the best things about our Journal is that no one edits it long enough to forget completely that he or she is really a working scientist.

Here we are. 1990. Great Editor. Lively Journal. And what do we hear from the top? The same old bleats about not representing the full range of topics covered at the annual meeting, as if editors turned down papers on some popular topics instead of the truth: people are too chicken to send papers where their friends aren't publishing.

Unexpected pleasures

Toni Scarpa, the noted artist, made up a yearly Christmas card that sometimes got more attention than he intended.

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The Editorial Board came to be a group of super-hard workers.

Bob Berger called one day, "Why can't we try Discussions like the Faraday ones in Britain?"

We did, mainly because Val essentially added a second full-time job to her activities and Bob himself was willing to set up lights and poster boards as well as handle the books. The first Discussion, on Fast Reactions, co-organized by Bob, Alan Schechter, and Peter Rentzepis, was such a success that we were swamped with suggestions and requests for a second. Fast reaction papers began to come to the Journal. Finally a happy way to expand purview.

The Publication Committee was so impressed that it refused to grant additional pages for a second Discussion (by now the *BJ* was fattening up, we didn't need to look for papers). I was so pleased at this Committee support that one day in my NIH office I told one of its members to take a small postage stamp and to write on it in nice large letters everything that any committee had ever done for this Journal. I then resigned on the spot with the big news that I hated being an Editor, wanted to go back to science, and saw no point wasting my time fighting. My resignation was not accepted because he wasn't the Publication Committee Chairman, so I started dialing the Chairman. (I really wasn't joking.) But then everything was spoiled when the Committee member suddenly decided that the Discussions weren't such a bad idea after all.

You can read the books that came out of Discussions 1–5. After the first try, we had lots of real support, even a committee that worked, particularly Bob Berger, who kept doing everything that everyone else missed, and the incomparable John Wolff, who kept our finances in good shape.

A few years ago I finally attended a real Faraday Discussion. I think ours are run much better. Our transcripts are real, not fakes written and submitted after the meeting. And we publish faster, by years.

Computerized typesetting

One day, to appease our two boys who really minded all the time I was putting into the *BJ* and *BD*, we three visited the actual printer, Science Press in Ephrata, PA. It took me about an hour of fighting cognitive dissonance to realize that they weren't throwing lead around trays but rather using computers to set up "type" to making printing plates photographically. I suddenly realized that all those people at keyboards were simply redoing what thousands of secretaries had already done, creating magnetic memory versions on tape, card, disc, or whatever. So why couldn't we send stuff to a printer on disc or tape or by phone?

Looking back, this wasn't a completely original idea, but remember it was a time (1979) when "word processor" might still be taken to be a paper shredder for making cheap sausage. Anyway, the senior guy from our publisher (Rockefeller Press) who was shepherding us, assured me that they knew all aspects of the business and that if it were a good idea they would have done it already. It turned out he didn't even know what I was talking about. He was annoyed when I wanted to talk more with Science Press. ("In all my years as publisher I have never heard of an Editor dealing directly with a printer.")

It became sort of a fixation for me. I extracted the typesetting codes from Science Press, got two computer friends, Bonnie Douglas and Martha Horton, to write a code translation program to convert ordinary word processor text to a tape for Science Press, got a secretary down the hall to put in the codes on a just-accepted Journal paper by John Fletcher, . . . and we had entered the computerized 70's.

Within some months we set up the entire Second Discussion with the new scheme using authors' magnetic "compuscripts." And as of this day Rockefeller Press is struggling valiantly to set up a tape routine that does about 70% of what Bonnie and Martha's old program did.

What with all the talk now about electronic journals, computerized typesetting, etc., the real issue to me is that new technology needs a different division of labor. There is not the distinction between textual copy-editing and typesetting that went with linotype. Scientific publishing is still largely in the hands of English majors and computer newcomers; the active technology of publishing scientific information is far behind the technology that produced the information. No matter how much we talk about saved time and money, it won't really work until the work is done by people who understand computers.

For Val and me this compuscript business was a great adventure. I made myself typeset several articles just to see what was involved. By the time I was done, I suppose I knew more stages of scientific publication–from doing the work to editing different kinds of papers to setting the type–than maybe anyone. (I visited another printing plant with the idea of getting into camera work and inking and all, but I decided that was going too far.) And Val, working with our wonderful friend Nancy Crawford Walther, discovered computer talent in herself that sent her on to setting up her own Press. In 1981 she did the Fourth Discussion Study Book and a whole book of Civil War letters on a gigantic phototypesetter in our dining room while holding our third child (born a few months before upstairs in the "Journal Office") on her lap. With her combined literary and technical prowess, she is bringing new power to "freedom of the press." Back to Ben Franklin.

Some things I didn't like

- Being simply a means for others rather than making my own science. You need a tough ego to be so used.

• Being visible to aggressive people because you are a means. I remember one guy from graduate school who had never even noticed my existence; right after I became Editor, I found an invitation to have a drink with him at the next annual Society meeting (I declined) and received a letter from him suggesting that I appoint him to the Editorial Board (after looking at the casual sloppy reports he had done for my predecessor, I didn't).

I stopped wearing my name-badge at the meetings just to avoid social climbers and angry authors.

And my best/worst moment . . .

One winter day, turning into an icy alley, Val skidded gently and broke up a small part of a neighbor's already crumbling brick wall. I put off fixing it until one grey Saturday when a collaborator visiting from England left to go to a museum. So I set off fuming, "I can't do science because of the editing, so David goes off to a Museum. I can't do editing or go to the museum because of this stupid brick wall . . ."

But I mixed the concrete, laid up the bricks, washed it down nice and neat, and called out the lady of the house to show her it was done. She looked carefully while I explained, "This part of the wall is strong now but the whole rest of it is ready to go, it's in such bad shape. You really should get it all rebuilt."

I must have made a good impression on her. She looked carefully where I was pointing, "You're right. It does need work. Please send me an estimate when you have time."

Bricklayer? Me? C'mon!