

Computer Writing and Research Lab

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The Current State of Currents: A Proposal for Improving Our Electronic Journal

Lisa Avery

lavery@mail.utexas.edu

Audra Rouse

audrarouse@mail.utexas.edu

University of Texas at Austin

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Abstract: This White Paper looks at the staffing and publishing practices of the CWRL e-journal, *Currents in Electronic Literacy*. We examine which submission and publishing practices best suit our needs and make recommendations for reorganizing our staff and enhancing our web presence.

Introduction

This White Paper examines the opportunities and challenges of publishing an academic journal in electronic form. The timeliness, easy accessibility, and low cost of publishing research electronically have led to an explosion of electronic academic publications in recent years. In addition, the flexibility and creative possibilities of multimedia web applications make e-journals an attractive alternative to print. Although few humanities e-journals are as well-established as their print counterparts, electronic publications dedicated to the study of technology and electronic literacy, like *Kairos* and the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, have gained a wide readership and strong reputation. This semester our developer team has been working on formulating a plan to improve the CWRL's academic journal, *Currents in Electronic Literacy*. Here we examine the principles behind our publishing, submission and editorial conventions in order to determine which of our practices actively suit our needs and goals and which practices create difficulties. We focus our investigation around questions of intended audience, editorial staffing and the peer review process, publishing practices, and layout.

Audience

Currents' mission statement is designed to be open-ended; it establishes *Currents* as a scholarly journal invested in “issues pertaining to electronic literacy, widely construed.” In addition to soliciting a variety of formats for submissions—multimedia projects and more traditional essays are both accepted—it allows for a large cross-section of academic work that explores intersections between technology, literacy and literature. While the mission statement of *Currents* isn’t expressly designed to attract graduate student work, the majority of the submissions come from students, and the earliest issues of *Currents* featured work primarily from students at The University of Texas at Austin.

Providing a means for graduate students to engage in conversations about computers and literacy is a strength that *Currents* should continue to build upon. In order to follow the goals of our mission statement, however, we can consider a few other means of expanding our pool of potential readers and contributors. Our goal is to solicit submissions from authors whose work makes an original and significant contribution to their fields of study, and our journal needs to work harder to attract those authors.

One way to do that is to make sure we are indexed in relevant databases. This semester we applied for inclusion in the *MLA Directory of Periodicals* and will soon be indexed there. Future *Currents* staff members might also consider submitting the journal to other databases, such as ERIC. Additionally, we should make sure we are referenced by other, similarly themed e-journals that have weblinks pages. We are, for instance, listed on the *Kairos* website, but we should make sure we are linked to other relevant sites as well. Finally, another measure we could take to expand our audience is to create an outside review board. If we can get high-profile staffers, this board would potentially draw a wider circle of readers and contributors and increase name recognition for the journal.

Editorial Board

Since its inception in 1999, and in its earlier incarnation as *CWRL: The Electronic Journal for Computer Writing, Rhetoric and Literature*, *Currents* has been primarily a graduate student-run publication. The editorial board has been made up of developers and an ad-hoc group of other CWRL student volunteers. We propose that the editorial board should be expanded to include professors and other specialists in the field of electronic literacy in order to enhance the credibility of *Currents*, attract better submissions, ensure that authors receive valuable feedback, and ultimately produce a higher quality journal.

Right now, the adjudication process for *Currents* is performed entirely by CWRL graduate students. One advantage of this arrangement is that it provides graduate students the opportunity to work on a scholarly publication. CWRL instructors—most of whom are not specialists in the field—are encouraged to become involved in academic discourse relevant to their

experiences teaching and staffing in the labs and, potentially, to take up research in computers and writing. They can also learn firsthand what is involved in the publication process.

The limits of producing a primarily student-focused publication with an editorial board composed entirely of students, however, outweighs some of the benefits if we are trying to reach an audience beyond the CWRL. Most peer-reviewed scholarly journals, both print and electronic, that have gained a high level of visibility and credibility in the academic community have editorial boards made up of professors who are well established in the field covered by the journal.

The lack of name recognition on our editorial board potentially limits the quality of submission that *Currents* can attract. Writers looking to publish their work seek out journals at least partially based on reputation, and because developer groups are made up primarily of non-specialists, our board may not be able to garner the authority that we desire. Even if graduate students remain our primary audience and group of contributors, the editorial board may largely determine the level of graduate student work we receive. If one of the goals of *Currents* is to publish the most high-quality scholarship possible, we will benefit from assembling a board of readers whom submitters are likely to recognize.

There are also practical reasons for expanding the board. It is difficult for a small developer group to give sufficient attention to and provide useful feedback on each submission. In previous years, editors have dealt with this dilemma by creating an ad-hoc advisory board of CWRL staff each year. The problem with this approach is that these board members do not always have the expertise to review the work fairly and provide substantial feedback to authors. CWRL staffers come from various backgrounds and most of us are not specialists in the field of technology and literacy. Although we are all certainly qualified to evaluate the general quality of an argument, we are less able to assess the contribution a submission makes to its specific field of research. Writers submitting to a serious academic publication should be able to expect that their readers are knowledgeable about the critical context of their argument. Those well-versed in the relevant criticism are also more able to identify truly “publishable” ideas. If we had an editorial board made up of professors, or even advanced graduate students in the Computers and English concentration, we would be able to spread out the editorial workload, assign submissions to the most qualified people, provide excellent reviews for writers, and thus ensure that we accept only the best work for publication.

Editorial Staff

Currents has always had a general editor, a coordinating editor and an advisory board. Some years, there has also been an assistant editor. The coordinating editor and assistant editor have been responsible for writing the calls for papers and reviews, which are then approved by the general editor. Coordinating editors are also responsible for collecting the submissions

and distributing them to the advisory board for review. One of the difficulties this year was that the coordinating editor and the advisory board assumed all of the editorial functions—adjudicating submissions, layout, copyediting and coming up with the theme for the next issue.

Our submission practices this year have raised some interesting difficulties that we would like to resolve for future *Currents* issues. We were fortunate to have the same coordinating editor for two issues, but that is unusual, and the changing of the staff generally occurs in the middle of the publication process. So, for instance, we generally have one group of people writing the CFP and CFR, and another—sometimes entirely different—group of people collecting and reviewing the articles as they come in. Because the coordinating editors and the advisory board members are all CWRL staffers—and this year they were all CWRL Assistant Directors and developers—the pool of human resources is fairly small and changes every year. This year, as in other years, the submission deadlines fall in the summer, when we will have six CWRL staffers, who may or may not remain in place for the fall, when revisions are due and the copyediting and layout are expected to take place.

One way to accommodate all of these difficulties, especially as *Currents* is a student-run journal and will therefore necessarily undergo changes in staffing, is either to request significant organizational involvement from the general editor or to ask the CWRL to nominate a managing editor, who would keep the position for a set time, say for two years. The managing editor could be an Assistant Director, since those appointments also usually run for two years, or could be a separate volunteer position, staffed from CWRL employees. The managing editor need not necessarily be well-versed in the field of computers and technology, but would need to be aware of the efficacy of gathering people who are (by recruiting those in Computers in English, for instance). Either the general editor or the incoming managing editor should address the following immediate needs: setting regular deadlines for CFPs, submission and review, copyediting and publishing; establishing clear practices for peer review; and gathering an editorial board. With one person in charge of the basic timeline and review practices, the changing advisory board and coordinating editors should be easier to manage.

Publishing

Because *Currents* is in a position to evaluate its existing practices with a view to creating a larger audience and a stronger submission pool, we also thought carefully about the way we have designed the publication practices of the journal. We wondered whether rolling submissions would be a good idea, since we could publish as we receive new material, or if we could simply have a rolling issue of the journal with additions and subtractions as things come in. The primary disadvantage of this practice is that most reference databases—like ERIC and the *MLA Directory of Periodicals*—require regular, periodic publication of issues, and we believe

that it is in our best interest to increase our visibility. Similarly, without a steady or consistent editorial staff, it is nearly impossible to advocate rolling submissions, as we would need reliable and steady commitments to both the adjudication process as well as readily available copy- and layout editors. Instead, we recommend continuing the process of having a themed yearly issue. In addition to meeting our requirements for periodic publications, we believe that organizing our issues around themes may also attract the interest and attention of a larger pool of potential editorial board members: the more interests we can engage and accommodate, the more we should be able to add to our human resources.

Building on the work of past editors, who have placed our editorial procedures in writing, we also recommend a solidified schedule which can be followed by future editors and editorial staff. Even though there are difficulties with changing staff, we believe that a clear structure will make the dynamic shifts of resources easier to manage and we strongly suggest that publishing form the basis of this structure. This year, we worked out a timeline which seemed to provide the most flexibility for receiving, peer reviewing and revising articles. We provided substantial time for revising because it was our experience—and it has been the experience of previous editors—that we tend to ask for substantial revisions for a majority of the pieces before we accept them. The dates we used are:

CFP: February 1
 Papers due: June 1
 Send to readers by: June 15
 Due back from readers: August 1
 Revisions due: October 1
 Publish: December 1 (last staff meeting)

In addition to these prominent deadlines, we recommend that editors and editorial staff make other deadlines for each term of office—those who work on the journal for nine months or just for the summer will need to determine intermediate deadlines for review boards, for copyediting, and for layout and web design.

Layout

The layout of *Currents* differs from other on-line and print journals in that it changes from year to year. Other similar publications, even those that publish on a set schedule with distinct issues, tend to have consistent design, logo, and color scheme that are the same even for the archive of back issues. Most on-line journals tend to follow the current trend in web design of creating every page to look essentially the same.

The variable design of *Currents* can make the site look dated because of the changing aesthetics of web design. Early issues of the journal use color schemes and layouts that are simply out of style. Although the most recent issue appears as the *Currents* home page, a reader searching for an article on a particular topic is just as likely to end up browsing a “retro”-

looking back issue.

Another potential drawback of the changing design is lack of visual unity. The consistency of other sites creates a distinctive identity for their journals. Unlike print journals, which must choose between maintaining consistency over time and updating the look of a publication, on-line journals can update an entire site, changing the appearance of back issues and current issues simultaneously. The inconsistency of the *Currents* design could be seen as a reflection of the constantly changing editorial board and the general lack of cohesiveness in managing the journal.

On the other hand, by preserving previous designs, *Currents* maintains a sense of its own history. Whereas most web sites erase all signs of previous layouts when the site gets a new look, *Currents* visually reveals its own evolution. Instead of creating a false sense of continuity, the design of the journal reflects the ever-changing nature of on-line publishing. The distinct design of each issue is a trait that makes *Currents* unique. Thus, we do not recommend that changing our design in order to conform to current trends in on-line publishing should be a top priority for *Currents*.

Another issue we have considered is how much we should continue to follow print conventions in *Currents* in terms of evolving content. One of the seeming advantages of publishing on-line is the possibility of continually updating content. Unlike in print journals, articles published electronically can be changed easily if authors who have reconsidered their views wish to revise their arguments. As far as we have learned, however, few if any on-line publications take advantage of this potential: once a piece is published in an issue, it, as well as the entire issue, is a fixed entity. This tendency to impose print limitations on electronic materials probably stems from the fact that traditional scholarship assumes static content. When authors quote an article, they expect it to stay the same over time. On-line academic journals generally try to meet this expectation by providing consistent links to unchanging articles.

It would be useful, however, to create a mechanism through which an author could update his or her work. While leaving work static serves a valuable purpose, the capacity to change would more accurately reflect the writing and thinking process. As a compromise between traditional scholarship and technology, perhaps *Currents* could institute a means for authors to add to or comment on their own work at a later time. The key to designing and publishing *Currents* is to strike a balance between the potential of its electronic format with the expectations of an academic audience.

Future editors of *Currents* might also consider reinstating a message board or blog for readers as well as authors to discuss each issue. This year we removed the old message boards because they were so full of spam and had attracted little legitimate discussion, but if *Currents* begins to draw a larger readership, we should definitely consider incorporating a new, spam-resistant way to facilitate discussion.

Conclusion

We strongly recommend that the CWRL make some organizational changes to *Currents* in order to provide the journal with a workable infrastructure. The most important recommendation we make—as well as the most pressing—is to separate editorial processes from publishing demands. We need our editorial board and our publishing staff to be separate (if overlapping) groups with clearly defined duties. To this end, we propose the creation of an editorial board made up of professors and other qualified individuals from outside the CWRL. We also advocate the appointment of a long-term managing editor and urge stronger participation from the general editor. These steps to institutionalize *Currents* would go a long way in ensuring the continued and improved quality of the journal. Once the editorial structure of *Currents* is firmly established, the editors and staff will be better equipped to exploit the possibilities of e-publishing in new and innovative ways.