

# What Makes A Good Journal?

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## Background

In 1988 the Charlesworth Group (in co-operation with The Publishers Association and ALPSP) inaugurated an award intended to encourage good practices in journal design and production. Alongside the main award, subsidiary awards have been made since for the best journal produced using a DTP package (in 1989) and for the journal with the best designed and printed cover (in 1990). The judges (3-4 people from a range of backgrounds associated with journals) typically select a prize-winner in each category together with a couple of runners-up.

The Charlesworth Group handle the publicity and make sure that information and entry forms are available for all likely entrants. The response has been excellent - over a hundred entries in each year. In view of the fact that the appearance of new titles has been tailing off recently, this number may seem surprising. However, declining sales of journals are leading to the amalgamation of titles, and this usually entails a reconsideration of layout and design. In addition, several well-established journals have decided on, or are considering, rejigging their design. For example the winner of the main award in 1989 was the *British Medical Journal*, which had clearly benefited from a redesign.

## Judging

The entries are accumulated at the PA headquarters in London, and a day is set aside for the judges to examine them. In the first year or two, there were necessarily long discussions of what was being sought. A framework now seems to have been established for the main award. This can be outlined by the Chairman at the meeting, and discussion can then mainly concentrate on the need for any change and the relative emphasis to be placed on different elements. However, the subsidiary awards, being different each year, still require discussion and establishment of appropriate frameworks.

Judging proceeds essentially by a process of elimination. All the journals submitted are first examined independently by the judges. It usually requires two votes in favour for a title to be retained at this stage. This exercise produces a long "short-list" which is then discussed in greater

detail, leading to the formulation of a short "short-list". Finally, there is an extended discussion of this latter short-list to produce a winner and two runners-up.

## What the Judges look for:

Basically, the judges are looking for a design that is both pleasing in appearance and efficient for the reader who is accessing information. Four items weigh most heavily in the judging

- (1) Materials - How easy is the journal to handle and use? What about paper quality, machining, binding etc?
- (2) Text - This covers both micro-scale (suitable typography, legibility, etc.) and macro-scale (layout and balance).
- (3) Graphics - Again, how well put together, but also how appropriate for the particular types of information being conveyed?
- (4) Navigation - How easy is it for the reader to move about the text, including the cover material? How easy to move from one item to another (e.g. from photograph to caption to text and vice versa)?

Besides these basic points, other factors are kept in mind. The most important of these are probably the following.

- (1) A "journal" is a somewhat hazily defined object. Officially, librarians are only acquainted with "periodicals" and "serials". The former probably comes closer to the ordinary understanding of the word "journal". In the case of material that is published annually, it can be very difficult to decide whether the volume concerned should be treated as a "journal" or not. Equally, where is the dividing line between a "journal" and a "magazine"? Does the glossy "newsy" publication that many societies provide to their members fall in the former category or the latter?
- (2) Many journals look very much the same from issue to issue; others, though they may retain the same basic layout, can differ appreciably. Some archaeological publications, for example, concentrate on reporting a different excavation in each issue. The layout of text and graphics (and the cover design) may therefore change considerably from one issue

to the next. Since the judges only see one or two issues of each title, there is always a query whether they are seeing a representative sample.

- (3) A continuing problem is the need to compare journals with quite different characteristics. For example, what is the basis for comparative evaluation of a research journal in mathematics containing no graphics with a glossy, highly-illustrated architectural journal?
- (4) It is also necessary to consider the resources available to a publisher. If two publishers produce equally well-designed journals, one on the basis of restricted resources and the other with lavish resources, the former should, presumably, be given a somewhat higher rating.
- (5) There is often a certain sameness about the appearance of many journals - not simply amongst those issued by an individual publisher, but between those produced by different publishers. Other things being equal, it seems worthwhile encouraging innovation in journal design.

For the subsidiary awards, these various guidelines require modification. For example, two topics which require additional emphasis when examining journal covers are:

- (1) the use of colour;
- (2) the need to check that the cover carries all the important data elements that a librarian, or a reader, would expect.

### Common drawbacks

The commonest faults noted over the past three years include the following.

- (1) The basic design is good, but it has not been well implemented in detail. For example, word spacing and hyphenation may need more attention, and the relationship between headings and sub-headings may be unbalanced.
- (2) Navigation, especially between text and graphics, is not as clear as it might be.
- (3) Text layout is suboptimal - either there is too much text on the page for easy reading, or there is too little, leaving excessive margins.
- (4) Material factors - paper quality, reproduction of photographs, introduction of colour - are not up to scratch.

### So what?

It might be queried whether these differences in design really affect the reader. After all, few readers choose which journal to read on the basis of their covers, and most readers readily adapt to different styles of journal presentation. However, there is good evidence that speed and accuracy of

information retrieval can depend on design factors. More generally, it can be argued that the judges for the Charlesworth awards are simply reflecting - perhaps in a slightly more systematic way - the likes and dislikes of ordinary journal readers. As an exercise, the short-listed journals for the award in 1988 were shown to students at Loughborough and Keele Universities. The students, who had no knowledge of design, were asked to look at the journals in terms of what they found attractive and unattractive. The journal that came out at the top of their list for attractiveness was actually the one that was awarded the prize that year.

Accepting that it is worth trying to improve journal design, is the message of the Charlesworth awards getting through? It is difficult to see any objective way of answering this question, though the continuing popularity of the competition suggests that it is at least striking a sensitive chord with publishers. In terms of feedback via the grapevine, however, comments do suggest that the publicity surrounding the awards and the actual examples chosen by the judges are causing some discussion and rethinking.

The Charlesworth awards were originally intended to encourage the work of the unseen heroes (and heroines) of the "good journal" world - the editors and the production staff. Over the past couple of years, there has been a noticeable increase in the amount of professional design expertise lavished on new or rejigged journals. This is obviously to be welcomed: it may well result, in part, from the impetus of the Charlesworth awards. At the same time, it has tended to deflect the impact of the awards away from their original target group towards full-time professional designers. A question for the future is therefore whether steps should be taken to redress this balance.

### Editor's statement

*Prof. Meadows is anxious to point out that this piece was presented as a review statement to the Award audience and was not designed as a scholarly article. However, we considered it to contain much of value for the UKSG readership and are grateful for his permission to reproduce it.*

*Editor*