

— Scientific data —

Copy, not committees: Editing a small regional geological journal 1989–1991

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Abstract

The constraints determining successful publishing of a small academic journal by a society or research institution are different from those controlling the output of major publishers. For three years I edited ‘Journal of the Geological Society of Jamaica’. Based on this experience, my top five recommendations to new editors of such publications are that copy is all-important for any minor journal; submit more of your own papers if other authors are unreliable; brutally, I consider committees to be an irrelevance unless their remit is well-defined and promises positive inputs, that is, papers for publication; encourage new streams of copy; and make and hit your own deadlines.

Key words: Jamaica, geology, minor journals, editorial board, academic society

1. Introduction

This is not the first time that I have written about the events discussed below in my first term as an editor-in-chief of a research journal. I have hitherto used my experiences to examine the work of editorial boards (Donovan, 2013, 2016) and, in part, to document my editorial adventures in Jamaica. Herein, I look at the same experiences in more detail as a basis for guidance to first-time editors of minor academic research journals, in the Caribbean and elsewhere. What did I do right and what could I have done better? New editors range from the industrious to the uncommitted, the latter a tribe that I have met, but did not understand. The period examined will be ancient history to many readers, but the lessons to be learnt are still relevant.

This is a personal account of how an editor – me – worked in a brief period over 35 years ago. At that time, I was on the teaching staff of the Department of Geology, University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica (UWI) and the research publication was ‘Journal of the Geological Society of Jamaica’ (JGSJ) (now ‘Caribbean Journal of Earth Science’). At the time there was a tradition that academic geologists at UWI occupied the role of editor of JGSJ in succession; the two previous editors, at least, came from this background (Donovan, 2022). At the time I took over as editor in 1989, the aim was to publish one issue (= volume) per year. The previous editor, Mr. Rafi Ahmad, had approximated to this ideal by publishing a thick conference volume and two regular issues, although the last of these didn’t appear until a few

months after I was elected editor. The printing company let him down and was so disorganised that I cancelled the order for offprints after another three months of waiting, telephone calls and broken promises. One of my earliest and best decisions as editor was to change printer.

The Jamaica printer problem is worthy of some brief comment. An ex-editor made the following recommendation; it is normal to change printer after three years. At first, the printer will want to encourage your business and for the first two years will stick to the timetable agreed with the Editor. After that, you will be considered committed, deadlines will slip and you would be promised action next week, which might take months to happen. He was right and my experience was just as predicted. If I had remained as editor for a fourth year, I would have changed printer again. Now 'Caribbean Journal of Earth Science' is online, it is a legacy problem without a modern equivalent.

The main issue with editing JGSJ was that it was a small journal with a narrow and specialist clientele. It goes without saying that small periodicals receive fewer submissions than big magazines (Donovan, 2011, 2017) and that the breadth of offers to parochial journals is constrained. At that time the main source of copy for JGSJ was the Department of Geology at UWI and our collaborators. Our department was small – four lecturing staff, a seismologist and a museum curator – and not everyone was writing research papers for local consumption or at all. Submissions were sent for peer review, but there was little intention of rejecting any of the papers; I needed the copy and reviews were needed to improve submissions (Donovan, 2011). I considered the remit of JGSJ to embrace the wider Antillean region, but, in truth, few submissions looked beyond Jamaica.

I regarded it as essential to publish one issue/volume of JGSJ annually. Not all editors had maintained this minimal output which I regarded as a failing. In the days before the World Wide Web (www), the JGSJ was the only evidence to reach outside the island that geology in Jamaica was alive and kicking. So, I had to encourage submissions and devise new sources of copy. In this I admit to some limited success.

2. Preamble

Looking at the last issue of JGSJ before I took over as editor (= volume 25 for 1988, published March 1989), there are indicators that copy was in short supply. It consisted of 52 pages. Six pages were abstracts from a conference that I had organised in 1987 and 39 pp. consisted of five research articles. That was 45 pages of science. An editorial was one page (although over $\frac{2}{3}$ of the page was blank), said little and could have been omitted; a list of the Society's publications filled one page; forthcoming papers filled another (a few did appear, but not until volume 29 in 1993); an erratum one page (half the page was blank); two pages of adverts; and a registration form for new members of the Society on one page. That is, about an eighth of the pages were not devoted to new, or indeed any, science.

3. Volume 26 (1989)

There was no slack from Volume 25; the outgoing editor passed no copy on to me. Nonetheless, when it appeared towards the end of the year, Volume 26 was four pages longer than Volume 25, still with two pages of advertisements, but the other 54 pages were solid science, eight research papers and reports of two field meetings. Three of these were co-authored by me, which was my first move to increase scientific content; I had to submit a greater proportion of my own papers to JGSJ than I had previously. This was not a decision taken lightly; any journal publishing over-many papers by the editor is open to criticism. However, I still published most of my papers elsewhere and those included in this issue had four co-authors.

One change I did make was the abolition of the Editorial Advisory Board (EAB). I have discussed my thoughts on the EAB elsewhere (Donovan, 2013, 2016, 2022). It was erected by the previous editor and I supported the idea at the time; the intention was the EAB would contribute and be judged on results. But half the EAB did nothing, apparently. I disbanded the board when I became editor to no effect on the publication effort of JGSJ. I also didn't write any editorials; I rather let people judge the journal on its content.

4. Volume 27 (1990)

Having published Volume 26, my next task, and an uncomfortable one, was to address the Society at the AGM early in 1990. I had a chance to show off my product, of which I was proud, and ask for more submissions, please. Why not? It was the only chance I had to address a varied group from the Society. One non-producing member suggested that I should influence government bodies to make publication a prerequisite for promotion. I responded that any professional organisation would be unlikely to listen to such promptings from a volunteer editor. I had added the subtitle 'A journal of Caribbean Earth science' to the title of Volume 26, which I thought was stating the obvious, but even such an innocuous change engendered critical comment from some. (Indeed, ideas voiced at the AGM to 'help' the editor were few and came from those with no editorial experience.) I found this peculiar, but it was merely the stimulus to crazier happenings during the gestation of Volume 28.

Yet I was getting into my stride. Pages expanded to 64, including two pages of advertisements, and 'Notes for the guidance of authors' moved from inside the back cover. The table of contents (= front cover) expanded to the inside of the back cover. The back cover was left blank, I do not remember why; it was a full-page advertisement in Volume 26.

The cover of the JGSJ changed. Hitherto, the colour was white with blue lettering (volumes 25 and 26), becoming blue with white lettering for volume 27. My idea was that different colours would make each volume distinct and easy to find on a bookshelf – this still works well for me – but there was some feeling against such innovation at the AGM the following year. One member was quick to emphasise that the Society colour was blue, as if each volume of JGSJ was a football jersey.

The truly significant change in Volume 27 was the introduction of a healthy book review section. Book reviews had appeared in JGSJ in the past, but irregularly and no more than one or two at a time, at best. I instigated a more comprehensive suite of reviews, seven in this issue, hence the table of contents expanding inside the back cover. Most reviews were dotted through the volume, filling space at the end of research papers that would otherwise have remained blank.

The other content was mixed which was good, albeit top heavy with palaeontology, my own field. A suite of one paper and eight abstracts from a conference 'Flood Rains and their effects on Jamaica', 2 July 1988' was something of a counterbalance, along with one of two reports of field meetings focussing on landslides. I dislike conference abstracts not being preserved in a serial. Short, snappy, but, not invariably, succeeded by a fuller contribution, too often an abstract ends-up as the only record of a worthy project (Donovan and James-Williamson, 2017).

Of five research papers and two reports of field meetings, I authored or co-authored three of them. Still too much Donovan.

5. Volume 28 (1991)

A year of change. First, the basics. Volume 28 included six research papers (three written or co-authored by me), an erratum and ten book reviews (three by me). As usual, it was published towards the end of the year. The cover was green, an obvious prod to those who wanted blue; a small pleasure to this editor, I like green. At the AGM early in the year my plea for copy met with the usual negativity from certain members. The Society elected a new President with no editorial experience and, unfortunately, he was listening, not to me, but to my detractors, who were also lacking in editorial credentials. Sadly, rather than speak with me, he acted, and acted unwisely, from a position of misinformed ignorance.

The proofs of my next book (Donovan, 1991) arrived in March. Obviously, I needed to correct these and get them back to the publisher. In consequence, I missed the monthly meeting of the Council of the Society. No big deal, I thought, until I casually quizzed a member of Council as to what did I miss, only to discover that the President had led a discussion on the instigation of an Editorial Advisory Board (EAB). Obviously, my detractors had the President's ear; the concept of the EAB was bad news to me. I was insulted by being ignored and was fuming. I discussed what had happened with my Head of Department, also an ex-editor of JGSJ, who understood my position better than anyone. To me, the EAB was a suggestion formulated by those with no editorial experience; how

does a committee generate copy for publication, which was my annual plea?

I wrote a charming and civilised letter of resignation after I had cooled down, but unexpectedly met the President before he had received it, so I showed him my copy then and there. I think he was taken aback by my reaction, not understanding what an insult all these moves behind the Editor's back were, and showing how little he understood the responsibilities of Editor and my pride in the job. I edited the 1991 volume, published on time; the next volume did not appear for two years. It contained no papers by me and I steered my co-authors clear of JGSJ for the next few years. I don't believe the EAB ever met; it was a shame that it was ever mooted.

6. Discussion

From the above history I have formulated five recommendations aimed to help the new editor of a regional academic journal, published by a society, university or museum. Focus on what is required to complete each issue of a journal is paramount. With JGSJ I had only one issue to publish annually, yet others may be responsible for two or more per year. Consider the following as a set of minimal requirements to guide publication.

1. **Copy is all-important.** Editors understand that they can only publish what they have to publish. The padding provided in Volume 25 by the previous editor was only that, padding. It was my job, in part, to encourage the writers in our community to write. While people without editorial experience doubtless understand this, they may act as if copy can be generated by means other than the hard work of writing. The suggestion that I should approach government departments and persuade or force them, somehow, to make publication in my journal part of their promotion process was in no way sound. Before I was editor, there was a suggestion that papers should be translated into Spanish to satisfy a non-existent need to read them on Haiti, etc. And these were probably the best suggestions, even though they were awful, that were made by the membership. An editor must

stay in contact with reality; leave the illusory to those not in charge of the journal.

2. **If necessary, submit more of your own papers.** I didn't like to do this, but the one author who I could entirely rely on was me. Fortunately, I was, and am, even in retirement, a productive author. Most of my articles, chapters and reviews were being published elsewhere. Nonetheless, three papers and three book reviews in Volume 28 was still a major contribution. Without the input of Donovan and his co-authors, it would have been a very slim volume.
3. **Committees are an irrelevance to the writer.** Do not join or instigate a committee unless you know exactly what is required of it; hot air is never a valid output. You will already have deduced that Steve is not a committee man who relishes the position. I suspect an editorial board of the great and the good must always be of only limited use to a small research journal, although they are potentially of greater input in the days of the www. The more members of such a board, the greater the likelihood of at least some being non-contributors. Recently, I was a member of a society committee (not an editorial board) and resigned after three meetings as there was nothing for me to do. If only all 'deadwood' would act similarly.

It is the actual contributors to any journal that must be encouraged. The question is how? Having an editorial advisory board to JGSJ would have likely been a non-contributory room of hot air. At JGSJ, I got out before I was sucked into any such vacuous self-important gathering. The important people are the contributors; a committee that does not include the writers of papers is not addressing its constituency. Foolish.

4. **Look for new streams of copy.** Get creative. The JGSJ was publishing conference abstracts before I was Editor, an initiation that I was happy to copy in Volume 27. To this I added book reviews, 17 over two volumes. After my departure, the next volume published just two book reviews, both originally instigated by me, and thereafter few, if any. I also encouraged reports of field meetings, but, of only four I published, two were co-authored by me.

5. **Make and hit your own deadlines.** Before I was elected to the editorship, I had decided that JGSJ must stick to its annual timetable. Thus, my main deadline was annual. I made deadlines to contributors for resubmission of revised typescripts, proof corrections, etc., reasonable, but flexible. Giving authors space to make their contributions made sense, as I could only usefully work on one paper at a time. I could easily judge when the next contribution required editing.

5. Acknowledgements

I thank my reviewer, Professor D.A.T. Harper (Durham University, UK), for his constructive and perceptive comments.

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