Editorial

Looking Back, Looking Forward
Reflections on Tenure as Editor of Circulation

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For the last 12 years, I have had the great privilege of leading the editorial team at Circulation. As my tenure as editor-in-chief comes to a close, I would like to reflect on the changes that have occurred in the journal, the role of journal editor, and the future of the journal, and do so in light of the rapidly changing landscape of cardiovascular biology and disease.

Circulation Format, Expansion, and Operations

Circulation has been a premier source of new and important information for researchers, practitioners, and trainees in cardiovascular biomedicine since its inception in 1950. Its editors have always prided themselves on providing the most cutting-edge information to the entire cardiovascular community, aiming to be all things to all readers. While doing so has required greater publication frequency and an ever-increasing number of pages to accommodate the rapid expansion of pertinent information, Circulation, the American Heart Association, and the publisher have risen to that challenge effectively over the last decade. In addition, very soon after I began my tenure, the journal became fully electronic and, beginning in 2008, expanded to a family of journals, with each journal focusing on select cardiovascular subspecialties. Together with the American Heart Association’s open-access journal the Journal of the American Heart Association, Circulation and the entire American Heart Association publishing enterprise set as a goal an increase in the number of papers published in this broad family of journals. We chose to do so to accommodate scientifically sound manuscripts that we historically rejected owing to space limitations. As a result of these efforts, published manuscripts increased significantly, as did reviewed manuscripts. These changes in publication format and access were necessary to adapt to the rapidly changing world of academic publishing and to accommodate the increasing specialization within cardiovascular biomedicine accompanying the rise of large, but more narrowly defined, communities of practitioners and scholars in the field.

The success of Circulation is in no small measure a consequence of the commitment and hard work of marvelous senior and associate editorial staff, as well as managerial editorial staff. As you might imagine, the daily workload of the journal is extraordinary and requires meticulous attention to detail, thoughtful analysis and interpretation, and seasoned judgment on the part of reviewers and editors alike. A highlight of the editorial process has been our weekly face-to-face meeting in which the great majority of senior and associate editors participate. Many, if not most, manuscripts are discussed openly at this meeting, and insights are provided not only by the associate editors with direct expertise in the topic but also by thoughtful associate editors in unrelated fields who frequently offer uniquely helpful comments that facilitate a well-considered editorial decision. This weekly meeting has been described by some as the world’s best cardiovascular journal club, and I, for one, wholeheartedly share that sentiment.

The Role of Editor

The role of the editor is a very privileged one. We are privy to novel information that holds the promise of advancing the discipline, ultimately for the benefit of patients. For the most promising of manuscripts, we engage with the authors to improve on the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of data to optimize their impact and benefit for the community of journal readers. We can further guide readers with editorial comments and other commentaries, including letters to the editor and their responses, ultimately attempting to clarify complex concepts, to highlight areas of discordance with prior published work, to emphasize the core message and define its limitations, and to consider areas for future investigation. In this way, the editor’s job is one of expert guide through the dense thicket of unpublished (behind the reader scene) and published work, attempting to persuade the reader, the practitioner, and the investigator to consider the data in a particular light or to raise questions about a study that encourages critical review by the reader. Having attempted to provide this type of guidance throughout my tenure at Circulation, I can tell you that it is challenging, humbling, enlightening, and fulfilling all at the same time. Although editors view themselves as arbiters of good scientific taste, we are certainly not infallible, for which reason we must be poised to redirect an editorial course, especially in areas that evolve rapidly.

There is a natural discordance that exists among authors, editors, and readers of any journal, and Circulation is no exception in this regard. Every author is rightly proud of his or her work, largely recognizing its strengths to the exclusion of its flaws, much as a proud parent does his or her child. Editors have the unique luxury of reading many manuscripts (=5000 per year for Circulation alone and =10000 per year for the Circulation family of journals) and thereby justifiably believe they have the perspective to place any paper in its proper context in the hierarchy of all papers. In this way, the editors...
provide a seasoned barometer of the value and impact of each paper. Readers, in contrast, interpret the value of a paper on the very personal basis of whether it may influence the course of their practice or research direction. Obviously, these perspectives are more likely to be discordant than concordant with each other, and none is truly perfectly objective, with each having its intrinsic biases. Therein lies the basis for the tensions that are commonplace among these three basic journal constituencies. Rejected authors often feel that the reviewers and editors misinterpreted their papers or have limited expertise to judge adequately; editors believe they need to choose papers that are scientifically sound and ideally will endure but are also influenced by the need to publish papers with the broadest appeal; and readers often wonder how some papers have any relevance at all to the discipline, at least to their very personal and relatively narrow area of expertise within the discipline. Ultimately, however, it is the editor’s job to render decisions based on the most objective of criteria while being cognizant of and sensitive to these differing perspectives.

The editor’s perspective and depth of knowledge of a field are important additional considerations in editorial decision making. Given the need to enhance continually the breadth of appeal of a journal, the tendency today among editors is to choose manuscripts of interest to the largest community of readers. Although we at Circulation are certainly aware of this need, we have not invariably followed this principle because we feel it is also our obligation to represent smaller communities of constituents, providing them with cutting-edge information that will guide their practice and research, even though the absolute number of readers with sufficient interest in these studies is comparatively small. In so doing, we attempt to provide useful information to all segments of the cardiovascular biomedicine community and have done so with continued commitment.

Yet another purpose of Circulation to which we are committed is education. We have developed or maintained a variety of educational series that address the needs of trainees (eg, the Cardiovascular Case Series), practitioners (eg, Clinician Update), and patients (Cardiology Patient Page) alike. Again, although these series may not contribute to a measurable parameter of impact, they continue to be quite popular and serve to fulfill an obligation that the journal has to key segments of its readership.

The Future of Circulation
The future of Circulation promises to be a healthy one under the leadership of Joseph Hill and his associate editors. Being an arbiter of scientific quality in the clinical and basic realms, Dr Hill will, no doubt, continue the fine tradition of ensuring that the journal remains all things to all readers. As cardiovascular science and medicine change, Circulation will continue to provide its readers with the most up-to-date information that influences their research and practice. With the rapidly expanding fields of –omics, nuanced clinical phenotyping, “big data” analysis, and network medicine and their integration into precision cardiovascular medicine, the discipline of cardiovascular biomedicine will evolve dramatically over the next decade. Circulation is poised to continue to serve all of its constituencies well, especially as these new fields are translated into clinical practice. Although I will miss my role in helping guide this wonderful journal, I look forward to returning to the role of interested reader, continuing to learn in a stimulating way from the journal’s pages. I thank the staff, associate editors, the American Heart Association, and the readers for this wonderful and memorable opportunity and for their faith in my leadership of this cherished journal.
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