

Food for Thought: The Importance of Preserving the JAC

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Some say the classroom is the last bastion of academic freedom in higher education. But has anyone stopped to consider the refrigerator? Why not? The office refrigerator may well be the most egalitarian place on campus. Whether we're first-year graduate students or tenured professors, at least our food enjoys equal standing in the refrigerator commons—there is no pecking order or favoritism. All our items have a right to space in the icebox, and no one has the right to tamper with them.

Violation of one's refrigerator rights certainly is a serious offense. That's exactly what happened several years ago in a department in which I used to work. One weekend while catching up on some things at work, my department chair decided to clean out the office refrigerator. There was no warning or announcement, and he was merciless in his refrigerator reform—everything went into the trash.

Cleaning out the office refrigerator is not a job for the faint-hearted. Neither is facing staff members on Monday when they find out their food items were unceremoniously thrown out. The overall reaction was neither middling apathy nor appreciation, but outrage. Who or what gave this person the right to meddle with *our* food? How dare he molest our discolored plastic containers, crinkled lunch bags, and various other unidentified food objects—especially without first checking with us?

Although some staff members later laughed about the incident, I think deep down they resented the encroachment on their personal food space. One thing the refrigerator-gate debacle clearly illustrates is that people should be included in decision-making that directly affects them.

Refrigerator Reasoning

Looking back on the incident, I recognize that the act of throwing away the food was a special type of gate-keeping. I imagine that my well-meaning boss hypothesized that department staff and faculty who succumb to food poisoning are less likely to be productive than those who do not. It is very difficult to dispute this type of logic. It's a pity things went so badly.

But perhaps others can benefit from his misfortune. Actually, it takes little imagination to extend this refrigerator reasoning to the *Journal of Applied Communications* because journal editors face tough gate-keeping decisions

Introduction

all the time. And, despite our best intentions, we sometimes risk offending authors, reviewers, or readers. We editors actually would have an easier go of it if peer-reviewed publications were like refrigerators and manuscripts were like food items. Editors and reviewers could allow nearly any item to be put in the fridge initially. Weeks later, if nobody has touched an item, it could be moved to a lower shelf or even discarded. Pungent items could be thrown out. Older items could eventually be replaced with newer ones. This arrangement would be so much easier for everyone.

But editorial gate-keeping is not and cannot be carried out in refrigerator fashion—it is not simply a case of one person deciding what to leave in and what to leave out. Reviewers and editors must oversee the checkpoints through which articles pass, and decision-making at these checkpoints is often subjective and difficult. Unfortunately, some perishable information items lose their freshness in the review process; other creative works lose some of their appeal in their preparation for print. Reviewers and editors must also sometimes make tough decisions about items that cannot be accepted for publication, and these items never make it into the refrigerator at all, despite the best intentions of everyone. Finally, authors must sometimes share the blame for holding on to items too long or for ignoring suggestions of reviewers or editors. Such are the challenges of peer review, and it takes time to work through them.

While tough judgment calls have to be made about some articles, I want JAC readers to know that editorial decisions are never unilateral. No items are discarded or held up for major revision without discussion. As editor, I speak not only with reviewers and editors, but also with authors, if they wish to talk. Nearly all of these discussions have been positive and have resulted in better decision-making about manuscripts. This style of gate-keeping is not always efficient from a time management perspective, but it is interactive and inclusive, and it creates an editorial environment in which every article has an equal opportunity to be published. Certainly the process could be improved further, and we are always open to suggestions. If you have ideas to share, please do so.

In recent months, questions have arisen about whether ACE can sustain a peer-reviewed publication. Clearly, we have experienced challenges in publishing on a regular quarterly schedule for some time now. I am available to discuss honestly the nature of these challenges with anyone. This is not an issue that lends itself to a quick fix by an editorial board or an editor, but we are trying to address the problems. What keeps me going is the fear of losing the JAC as a practical and creative publishing outlet for ACE members. As a 21-year ACE member, I can't imagine ACE not hosting a peer-reviewed

journal. I truly believe the peer-review system can work, and work well, for ACE—we just have to find the right fit and adapt procedures to the needs of our organization. If you agree, please let us know. We need your support now.

There are many opportunities for you to help sustain and improve the JAC, such as serving on the JAC Editorial Board or as an article reviewer or author. As the JAC explores the transition to an electronic format, there will be even greater need for both technical and creative expertise. I hope you will consider lending a hand in these efforts, and I thank those who are already doing so.

About This Issue

In order to catch up this calendar year and print more articles as soon as possible, we are publishing combined issues for the 2007 year. In the current issue, we are again happy to offer you a mix of research and professional development items. On the professional development front, Terry Meisenbach and Lynette Spicer dispel several myths about eXtension and call upon communicators and information technologists to bring their expertise to this growing enterprise. In research, Courtney Meyers and Jeff Miller share results from recent focus group research that examines consumer preferences for food labeling. Lisa Lundy then examines the effect of message frames on the attitudes of internal organization audiences, and Emily Rhoades describes how researchers can collaborate with practitioners to improve organizational Web sites and relationships with external partners. Finally, exploratory research by Lundy and her colleagues addresses the role of entertainment media in shaping perceptions of agriculture. We also thank Barbara Rixstine for her review of Kramer and Call's *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide From the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University*.

We hope you enjoy this issue and hope to have another to you soon.

