

# Always aiming for the best: For scientists and for science

Alan Hall

Editor-in-Chief, *The Journal of Cell Biology*

As the new editor-in-chief at *JCB*, I am delighted to have this opportunity to express a few thoughts about the journal and its role in serving our scientific community. I believe the publishing experience at the journal should be as fast and fair as possible, while maintaining the highest quality and relevance of our published papers. With a world-class editorial board of committed and engaged scientists, and an outstanding professional staff in the *JCB* editorial office and at the Rockefeller University Press, we aim to do just that.

It was 20 years ago that I was asked to join the *JCB* editorial board, and there have been huge changes in the scientific enterprise since then. Though the excitement and societal importance of research and discovery have not diminished, the appeal of a career in research surely has. The biggest issue I see turning off young trainees today is the vagary of funding, but the stress associated with publishing their work runs a close second. It can take forever, and if you're not in one of the "top" journals it seems like you've won second prize at best. Attempts are being made to change the publishing landscape and its capricious influence on careers, but it's a slow process. I, for one, continue to take great pride in being associated with *JCB*, a journal that draws upon the scientific community, through its editorial board, to make the decisions that matter, both on the review process and on the quality and significance of its published content.

It's hard to believe there was a time when, as a postdoctoral trainee, I could go to the library once a week and read pretty much every paper relevant not

Correspondence to Alan Hall: halla@mskcc.org



*"This judge is known as tough but fair, with a great sense of humor."*

only to my own work, but also to the wider discipline of molecular cell biology. Contrast this with the staggering amount of data being generated in the biological sciences today. I recently received an e-mail drawing my attention to several *hundred* biological journals published by just one company! Even with the electronic wizardry available today for searching, presenting, and communicating, the pressure to specialize is

overwhelming, raising a significant challenge facing today's trainees.

Can journals help? I think journals such as *JCB* can, and this is the main reason why I have given my time and commitment to the journal for a major part of

© 2014 Hall This article is distributed under the terms of an Attribution–Noncommercial–Share Alike–No Mirror Sites license for the first six months after the publication date (see <http://www.rupress.org/terms>). After six months it is available under a Creative Commons License (Attribution–Noncommercial–Share Alike 3.0 Unported license, as described at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>).

© Donald Reilly, The New Yorker Collection, www.cartoonbank.com

Downloaded from [http://rupress.org/jcb/article-pdf/207/1/7/1366439/jcb\\_201409096.pdf](http://rupress.org/jcb/article-pdf/207/1/7/1366439/jcb_201409096.pdf) by guest on 02 June 2023

my career. The goal of *JCB* is “simply” to publish the very best work in cell biology, with the ideal that everyone in the biomedical sciences, whether trainee or tenured, will want to read *every* paper in each issue to keep abreast of the major discoveries in this broad discipline. E-mail alerts will tell you where to find papers in your immediate subject area, but they won’t tell you how to find “the 20 papers that every cell biologist should read this month.” So how can *JCB* deliver this? We do this by leveraging the expertise and scholarly judgment of a committed group of around 100 editorial board members, all practicing scientists representing much of cell biology and its intersecting disciplines. They deliver. They are not simply a list of eminent scientists that the journal displays as eye candy. They decide whether a submission is potentially suitable, they choose the reviewers, and they assess the reviewers’ comments—then they make an editorial decision. We all like to think that everything we do is somehow groundbreaking, but, not surprisingly, we are not always the best judges of our own work. The *JCB* editorial board is charged with identifying the best cell biology, loosely defined along the lines of “significant conceptual advances.” Although there is clearly an element of subjectivity in what is “significant,” we can’t think of a better way of selecting the best.

Is *JCB* doing everything right? Well, as the airlines say, we know you have a choice, and we clearly cannot ignore competition for the best papers. My two predecessors, Tom Misteli and Ira Mellman, have introduced significant changes both behind the scenes—free public access to all content within 6 months of publication, copyright retention by authors, and streamlining of the review process—as well as up front in the journal—the short Report, the Tools format, and multimedia access to content (Hill and Rossner, 2008; Williams and Misteli, 2011; Williams et al., 2012). Our news team, led by Ben Short, communicates the primary research we publish to a wider audience through interviews, podcasts, and social media. Complementing our primary research content, Reviews Editor Priya Prakash Budde, working closely with the editorial board,

has done a fabulous job in identifying themes that span disciplines and synthesize broad concepts, rather than rehashing the usual suspects.

So what are some of the upcoming challenges facing *JCB*? A big talking point within the scientific community right now concerns reproducibility of published work. The widely acclaimed efforts of Mike Rossner, when he was managing editor of the journal, established *JCB* as the leader within the publishing community in introducing considered and professional in-house review of all image data destined for publication in the journal (Rossner, 2002; Rossner and Yamada, 2004). In addition, the *JCB* DataViewer is a unique browser-based application that allows readers access to the primary data associated with *JCB* papers (Hill, 2008). With new guidelines likely to be issued by the National Institutes of Health on the topic of data reproducibility, we will continue to take the lead and adopt whatever policies are necessary to ensure that the journal publishes high-quality data, appropriately controlled and statistically analyzed. The increasing number of retractions in high-profile journals, resulting in a few cases from fabricated data but more often from rushed and sloppy work, likely represents only a fraction of what’s out there. Although policies aimed at ensuring data integrity will require some additional effort both by authors and publishers, this issue must be addressed by any journal that aspires to a reputation for quality. I believe *JCB* has earned such a reputation, and we aim to keep it.

What about cell biology itself? Cell biologists have it both easy and hard. The work they do is largely fundamental to any and all areas of biomedicine. That’s the easy bit. However, this raises the question of whether it should continue to be a discipline in its own right or simply an aspect of the work done by developmental biologists, molecular biologists, neurobiologists, immunologists, pathologists, physiologists, plant biologists, host–pathogenologists (not a word, I know), and any other “-ologists” I have left out. The answer from the incoming editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Cell Biology* is just as you might expect: I believe it is crucial that graduate students and postdocs continue to be

exposed to and trained in this rigorous discipline. Cell biologists think differently. While their best work is integrated into the context of these broader themes, the central focus is the cell. This significantly affects the kinds of questions asked and the depth to which the mechanistic details underlying cell behavior are pursued. Here at *JCB*, we have purposefully assembled an editorial board whose members are major contributors to cell biology and represent many of the disciplines just mentioned. With the help of these dedicated individuals, *JCB* will continue to be a journal run by scientists, for scientists (Mellman, 2009), and we will ensure that the scientists who represent the journal represent the full breadth of this field. This, we believe, will keep *JCB* healthy and relevant, a place where young trainees and not so young PIs go to publish and read about the latest advances in cell biology. Together with Executive Editor Liz Williams and the dedicated staff she works with, the editorial board and I will endeavor to steer the journal through these competitive times and maintain and build upon its reputation for publishing the very best cell biology.

## References

- Hill, E. 2008. Announcing the *JCB* DataViewer, a browser-based application for viewing original image files. *J. Cell Biol.* 183:969–970. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1083/jcb.200811132>
- Hill, E., and M. Rossner. 2008. You wrote it; you own it! *J. Cell Biol.* 181:405–406. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1083/jcb.200804037>
- Mellman, I. 2009. By the scientists, for the scientists. *J. Cell Biol.* 184:7–9. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1083/jcb.200812145>
- Rossner, M. 2002. Figure manipulation: assessing what is acceptable. *J. Cell Biol.* 158:1151. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1083/jcb.200209084>
- Rossner, M., and K.M. Yamada. 2004. What’s in a picture? The temptation of image manipulation. *J. Cell Biol.* 166:11–15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1083/jcb.200406019>
- Williams, E.H., and T. Misteli. 2011. New tools for *JCB*. *J. Cell Biol.* 194:663–664. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1083/jcb.201108096>
- Williams, E.H., P.A. Carpentier, and T. Misteli. 2012. Minimizing the “re” in review. *J. Cell Biol.* 197:345–346. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1083/jcb.201203056>