

Editorial

Though the online version of *The Journal of General Physiology* was inaugurated only in 1997, it already is likely to be more widely used than the paper version. This does not mean the paper version will disappear anytime soon, as there still are distinct advantages associated with perusing the newest hard-copy issue. But even then, the enhanced capabilities allowed by having *Supplemental Material* available in the online version, as well as the tools embedded in the interactive Web version, appear to have become mainstays in the life of our readers. Currently, the online version is accessed from ~7,500 unique IP addresses each month, with more than 14,000 articles being downloaded (in HTML and/or PDF format); and the number of downloads has increased by ~40% per year. This is gratifying, but the excitement must be tempered by the fact that, until now, articles published in 1996 or earlier have not been available online. This is beginning to cause concerns because, as scientists become more accustomed to using the online versions of their favorite journals, human nature will make us favor articles that are available online—and preference will be given to journals that are easily searchable. As this editorial is being written we are beginning to address this serious issue; we expect eventually to have all articles published in the *Journal* available online as searchable PDF files and enhanced with the tools readers have come to expect for our current articles. Early in 2003, we will “deliver” the first installment, when all articles published in 1975 and later will be available online. Following our policy, these articles will be freely available to all—as all articles published in the *Journal* are freely available 12 mo after their publication. We consider this to be an important development. With increased access to articles published in the *Journal*, we further emphasize our commitment to the online version and to maintaining the information—not only the material that was, and is, published in the paper version, but also the *Supplemental Material*, which is published only online.

When planning for this new initiative, we noted some common misconceptions about online publications. Though there are definite savings (in paper and postage) associated with online publishing, there also are significant costs associated with storing the information and maintaining access. In the past, once an issue was mailed out it became the responsibility of individual subscribers (libraries and scientists) to maintain and archive the information. Increasingly this responsibility, and the associated costs, is being transferred to the journal publishers. Thus, the savings incurred “up

front,” when an article is published, will be balanced by the expenses associated with maintaining the information. We therefore wish to emphasize that we (the Editors) and The Rockefeller University Press, are fully committed to supporting the archiving of all volumes of the *Journal* that appear online.

In an unrelated initiative, we will begin publishing Brief Reviews. These Brief Reviews are meant to complement the Perspectives, in the sense that they usually will focus on unresolved issues; but they will be free-standing contributions, i.e., without the debate that is a key element of the Perspectives.

In addition to online publication, the internet and world wide web provide for many other capabilities, including distributing some of the responsibilities of the editorial decision making. We already have taken the first steps in this direction, as Dr. Kenneth C. Holmes at the Max-Planck-Institute in Heidelberg, Germany, accepted the responsibilities as Associate Editor effective July 1, 2002. Distributing decision making, however, also means distributing responsibility, which is associated with its own problems. For better or worse, the *Journal of General Physiology* long has been recognized for the consistency of the editorial process, which is maintained at our weekly Editors’ Meetings where most articles are discussed. Until recently, the Editor signed all decision letters—irrespective of who actually drafted them—as a reflection of his overall responsibilities. The decisions usually were based on the group discussion that occurred at the weekly meetings (where Dr. Holmes participates over the telephone). But, while this practice ensures consistency, it will be difficult to maintain as we move toward a more distributed editorial decision making process. So, while the Editor is responsible for all aspects of the *Journal*’s activities, it will eventually be necessary to delegate some of the decisions. As a first move in that direction, effective July 1, 2002, the decision letters began to be signed by the person who drafted them—based on the group discussion. Continuing in this direction, effective with the January 2003 issue, we will at the end of each published article identify the individual, whether it be the Editor, an Associate Editor, or a Guest Editor, who assumed editorial responsibility for that article during the group discussion. We believe this enhanced transparency in the editorial decision making process will serve the *Journal* well, as it grows and further expands its scope.

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