

From the archives



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Current Science Rupee Fund
An Appeal

There is at present no Journal published in India which deals with all branches of scientific work. It has been felt for some time that a publication of this nature would assist in co-ordinating research and in supplying up-to-date scientific information. The matter was discussed by a number of the members of the Indian Science Congress at the Bangalore meeting last January, and it was unanimously agreed that such a Journal was most desirable and an influential Committee was formed to examine the scheme in detail.

It has now been decided to publish a monthly periodical with the title *Current*

Science. Many offers of help have been received, but before the scheme can be finally launched the financial position must be firmly secured. To effect this the Committee has decided to institute a 'Rupee Fund' to which every one interested in science in India is requested to contribute One Rupee. There are few who cannot spare this small sum. If all were to help, the aggregate together with contributions already promised would suffice to relieve the Committee from pecuniary anxiety.

You are earnestly requested to hand your rupee to one of the gentlemen whose names are noted below or to forward it direct to K. S. Varadachar, Esq., Hon. Secretary, 'Current Science' Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore.

Dr. S. S. Bhatnagar, D.Sc., University Chemical Laboratories, Lahore.

Dr. B. Dasannacharya, Ph.D., Professor of Physics, Benares Hindu University, Benares.

Mr. R. H. Dastur, M.Sc., Royal Institute of Science, Bombay.

Dr. P. B. Ganguly, D.Sc., Professor of Chemistry, College of Science, Patna.

Dr. J. C. Ghosh, D.Sc., Professor of Chemistry, Dacca University, Dacca.

Mr. K. D. Guha, Manager, Dairy Farm, Dayalbagh, Agra.

Dr. A. N. Kappanna, D.Sc., The University, Nagpur.

Mr. Khub Ram, M.A., M.Sc., Khub Ram Hostel, Delhi.

Dr. H. Parameswaran, D.Sc., F.Inst.P., Professor of Physics, Presidency College, Madras.

Mr. M. Raman Nair, B.A., A.I.I.Sc., Reader in Chemistry, University of Lucknow, Lucknow.

Mr. S. Ranganathan, M.Sc., A.I.I.Sc., Pasteur Institute, Coonoor.

Mr. M. Rangaswamy, B.A., A.I.I.Sc., Asst. Physico-Chemist, The Lac Research Institute, Ranchi.

Dr. M. N. Saha, F.R.S., University of Allahabad, Allahabad.

Dr. H. K. Sen, D.Sc., D.I.C., University College of Science, Calcutta.

Rai Bahadur Shiv Ram Kashyap, B.A., M.Sc., Professor of Botany, University of Punjab, Lahore.

Mr. B. N. Sreenivasaiiah, M.Sc., Meteorological Office, Poona.

Rao Bahadur B. Viswanath, F.I.C., Government Agricultural Chemist, Coimbatore.

Bangalore
July 28, 1932.

The "Current Science"
Working Committee

OPINION

JAMA, NEJM and beyond – Journal editing in the new millennium

K. Satyanarayana

The historic and unprecedented sacking of editors of two prestigious medical journals in quick succession that attracted a lot of attention finds a mention in *Current Science*¹, where Balaram is bang on target at least on two issues – that journals do exceedingly well under 'benign editorial dictatorship' and that there is a gradual change globally to convert the technical journal into a more newsy incarnation. In fact it is the latter that put

George Lundberg, the editor-in-chief of *The Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA)* into trouble with the management which sacked him on 15 January 1999 (ref. 2). The removal of the Jerome Kassirer, editor of prestigious *The New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)* in June 1999 was however without much bloodshed. The journal and the editor amicably parted when Kassirer took a principled stand against

his owners on the issue of using *NEJM*'s name in some future journals to be brought out by the publishers³.

While not exactly condemning these actions of the employers in their legitimate right to sack their employees in that Mecca of free market America, in common with the editors the world over, Balaram appears to have a soft corner for the sacked editors. Removal of these editors made big news as rarely do senior

medical editors get sacked in quick succession. Overwhelming support came from editors of journals from both sides of the Atlantic^{2,4}. This despite the known 'rivalry' between the biggies – *NEJM*, *The Lancet*, *JAMA* and *The British Medical Journal (BMJ)* – especially between *NEJM* and the rest. That Kassirer got such a support shows how much editors value their freedom and certainly got rattled when their owners showed surprising steel in their decisions. Not many editors thought that decisions considered very much within their ambit could put their jobs under jeopardy.

'Editorial freedom' was freely used to comment in signed editorials on how publishers subverted editorial freedom; autonomy of functioning, independence, etc. are at stake and if action is not taken against the erring publishers' representatives the edifice of scholarship will crumble^{2,5}. Some dispassionate and objective appraisal of the issues will be in order as rarely do scholarly journals face such a crisis. This is also an opportunity to debate the much neglected issue of the role of editors in science journals, and in the furtherance of scholarly pursuits.

Lets us look at the *JAMA* episode closely. A paper was slated to appear in the 20 January 1999 issue in which two researchers Stephanie Sanders and June Reinisch reported a survey⁶. The issue discussed was what constitutes having had sex. When asked, 'Would you say you "had sex" with someone if the most intimate behaviour you engaged was oral-genital contact'? As many as 59% students responded that oral sex is not sex and only 'penile-genital intercourse' constitutes sex. This study would probably have not got more than a cursory attention if the US President Bill Clinton's impeachment trial was not on. Clinton had said that oral sex is not technically 'having had sex'. The authors argued that these findings have important public health implications as they will help health-care workers taking records of sexual intercourse and teachers in public health. Lundberg apparently agreed on the significance.

Certain interesting facts surfaced later. This research paper, from the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction, Indiana University was accepted in December 1998. Lundberg advanced the publication of this article to coincide with Clinton's impeachment trial. These survey data from 599 students

at a large mid-Western university were collected in 1991. When a US website broke the embargo, the AMA was forced to have a press conference on 15 January, five days before the paper appeared. The American Medical Association (AMA) which owns *JAMA* felt that the editor has sensationalized the issue and tried to influence the decision of the Senate.

The AMA's board of trustees was not amused. It felt that the editor erred by advancing the publication of this paper as also tried to misuse his position '... by inappropriately and inexcusably interjecting into a major political debate that has nothing to do with science or medicine'². Lundberg was summarily dismissed. Predictably, some editors criticized the AMA for firing him and defended Lundberg's right to advance publication. What is more, Kassirer⁷ says that medical journals can actively contribute and influence to a political debate⁹. Virtually all editors perceived the sacking to be a threat to editorial freedom with one editor screaming '... *JAMA* is no longer part of free press'². It is difficult to understand how such 8-year-old data could be considered so critical to public health that it merits fast publication. Lundberg was no novice; he was editor-in-chief of *JAMA* for over 17 years. He knew what exactly he was doing. After his sacking, Lundberg was branded as a ruthless 'self-publicist' always wanting to be in the news. Even his successor Catherine DeAngelis opined that Lundberg was perhaps more of a journalist than a medical editor.

Kassirer, on the other hand, was not 'removed' but his contract, which expires in March 2000, was not renewed. He was unwilling to go but was sent away in September on a 7-month sabbatical. Kassirer's 8-year tenure took *NEJM* to new heights, which even the management acknowledged. The reasons for his removal were not editorial but purely administrative and business related. Kassirer admitted that he was leaving as these differences could not be resolved. The publishers Massachusetts Medical Society (MMS) wanted to diversify their journal portfolio and all the new publications in this stable would be using the *NEJM* name. Kassirer like his predecessors vehemently opposed the idea of *NEJM*'s masthead being used for journals in which the editorial quality is not under their (*NEJM* editors') control. Apparently, the cash-strapped MMS chose to

terminate the contract of the editor than lose out a business opportunity.

Eventually, due to the flak they received, the MMS came to an agreement with the senior editors on this issue. The interim editor-in-chief has been given 'authority over the use of the name, logo and content of *The New England Journal of Medicine*, in print or any other form. Spin-off journals will not use the *NEJM* name in their titles but will carry 'from the publishers of *The New England Journal of Medicine*'⁵.

The debate as to who calls the shots in the running of a periodical – the editor or the owner/publisher – has been on for decades in mainstream journalism. Sacking of errant editors by newspaper barons in India and elsewhere is quite common, and an accepted occupational hazard. The function and role of editors in the newspapers and scholarly journals is quite different. Unlike newspaper editors, journal editors, many of whom are working scientists, keep away from political issues except when they adversely affect science. The recent decision of Maneka Gandhi on laboratory animal care that nearly brought biomedical research to a standstill is one such example.

The sacking of Lundberg triggered-off a debate whether editors should tread into areas outside science to actively influence political decisions that have little direct bearing on science or medicine. In such cases should the owners (scholarly societies or private publishers) be silent spectators? Like, Lundberg was accused of trying to save Clinton's job besides weakening Republican's influence in American politics. Where does the responsibility of the editor end in the running of a journal? Should an editor interfere in business issues that in no way dilute editorial independence and integrity and the quality of journal? Was 'editorial independence' really at stake as widely commented upon?

It appears that what is being viewed as 'editorial independence' is more an issue of 'editorial authority'. Editors are used to unbridled freedom and independence with their decisions rarely questioned by the owners. This is more so for 'successful' editors like Lundberg or Kassirer who perhaps felt that they are far too important for their journals. Not surprisingly, the unprecedented sacking of two senior editors sufficiently shook other editors to over-react on the repercussions of such an act. The perceived conse-

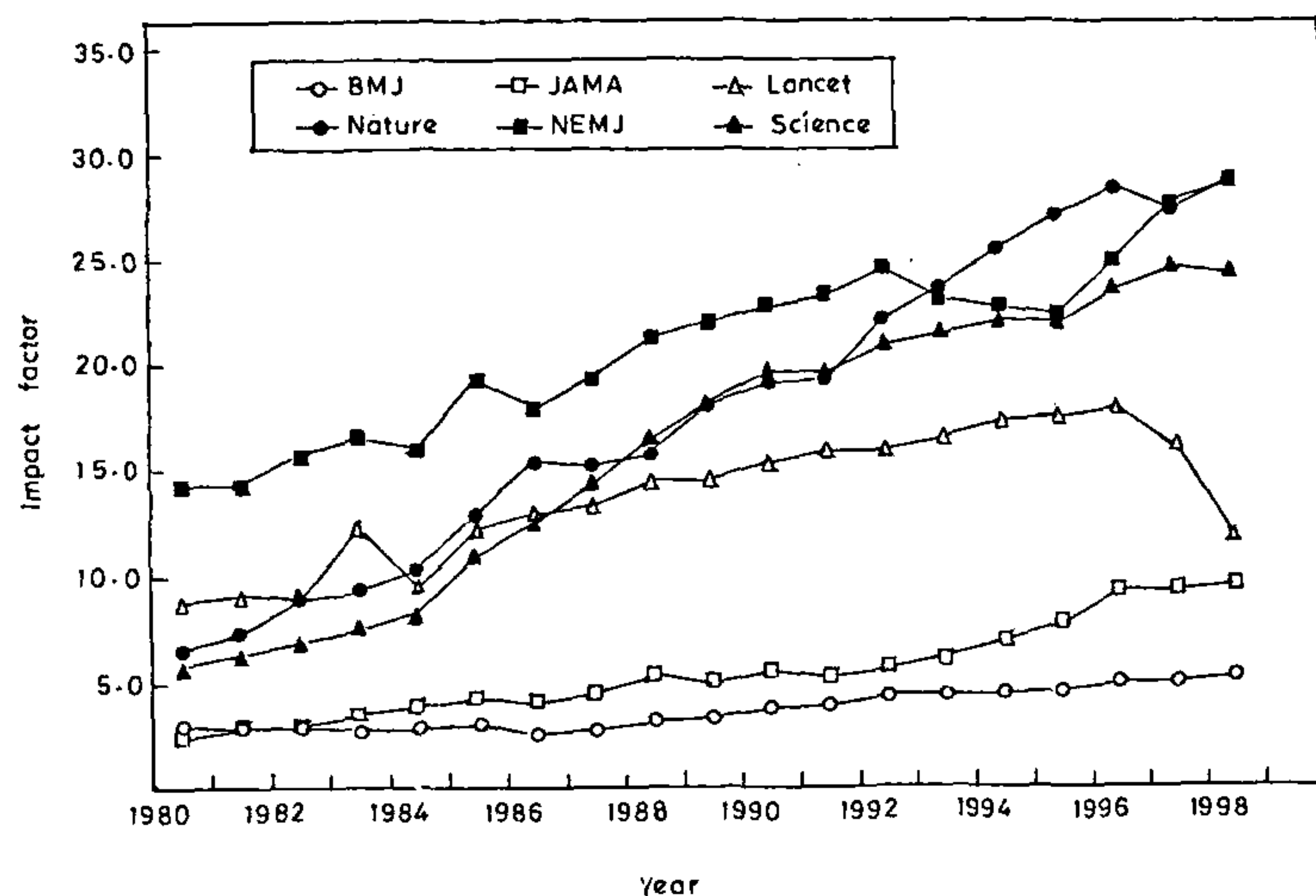


Figure 1. Year-wise impact factor of some scientific journals.

quences ranged from the journals losing credibility to their extinction⁸.

How important are editors to the success of a journal? Does success depend on the editor alone or the overall 'image' of the journal/publisher carried forward as many successful journals have a long tradition of excellence? Established scholarly society-owned periodicals like *NEJM* (MMS), *Science* (AAAS), *Proceedings of the National Academy Sciences of USA* (NAS), *Journal of Biological Chemistry* (SBC) are notable examples. For authors and readers of these journals, it perhaps may not matter who is at the top as long as the quality of editorial content and peer review practices are maintained. New editors do bring in additionalities that make a journal more interesting to attract more readers.

But does the editor matter for an already successful journal? I looked at some successful (high impact) journals to see whether it is true. As the circulation of these journals has not significantly changed in recent years, the only other quantifiable parameter, the impact factor (IF) was chosen. Virtually all the journals showed an increase in impact factor from

1980 to 1998. Lundberg took over in 1982 and the impact of the papers he accepted would not be visible until at least 1984 or later. But the IF of *JAMA* did not show appreciable difference until after 1995. For *The Lancet*, *NEJM* and *BMJ* the IF rose steadily despite *Lancet* having had, may be, three editors during the period as compared to two for *NEJM* and *BMJ*. Even *Nature* and *Science*, I think, had just two changes in leadership during this period. This is not to belittle the contribution of these editors during their tenures. But, in my opinion, journals are just as good as the original research they carry. In *JAMA*, and more so in *NEJM*, the owners never interfered in the editors' primary job of publishing quality science, which even the editors acknowledged. What would have been the reaction of the critics if private publishers owned *JAMA* and *NEJM*?

One important reason for the present conflict could be the changing role of the editor in recent times and the tendency of the editor to be as much, if not more visible than the journal. This trend was evident in *NEJM* and perhaps *BMJ* for long. Perhaps it became more prominent

with the establishment of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) in 1978 to establish new guidelines for medical journals. Editors drew up guidelines on issues like who should be an author, what constitutes ethical and unethical practice, conflict of interest and so on. They demanded and got a host of declarations from authors even before a paper was considered for publication. Editors also started being more pro-active on issues that were not hitherto in their ambit as long as they could attract debate and perhaps controversy (and same column inches in the media for the editors!). This publicity improved the visibility and brought in more authors, circulation, and advertisers.

It appears that these controversies have arisen because editors, at least from medical journals, have become increasingly vocal. When journal editors see their role beyond the conventional gate keeping of science, it is bound to create friction with their publishers/owners. With the current crop of medical editors in no mood to yield on 'editorial independence', the uneasy relationship between editors and owners will perhaps continue in the new millennium.

1. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 77, 1121.
2. Horton, R., *Lancet*, 1999, 353, 252.
3. Kassirer, J. P., *New Engl. J. Med.*, 1999, 341, 686.
4. Smith, R., *Br. Med. J.*, 1999, 318, 210.
5. Horton, R., *Lancet*, 1999, 354, 358.
6. Sanders, S. S. and Reinisch, J. M., *J. Am. Med. Assoc.*, 1999, 282, 275-277.
7. Kassirer, J. P., *New Engl. J. Med.*, 1999, 340, 466-467.
8. Rennie, D., *J. Am. Med. Assoc.*, 1999, 282, 783-785.

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