

**‘A Resource that Contains a Journal’:  
The First Two Years of the Journal of Humanitarian Assistance**

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*ABSTRACT*

Even as the number of electronic journals continues to grow, the Journal of Humanitarian Assistance remains an unusual venture and the experience of its editors is instructive for those wishing to combine academic, practitioner and electronic publishing resources for purposes which extend beyond the traditional reach of any on their own.

The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance was created from an awareness that although a good deal of work of every sort is produced on the subject, little of it travels beyond national, organisational and professional boundaries. Work that is truly international and multi-disciplinary is hampered, and important lessons not conveyed because there is no single source - timely, and open to the full range of subjects and issues - for the many disparate actors. The journal is an entirely free, open-access resource that contains an academic journal, but which also carries a range of materials which, by dint of timeliness or length would not be suitable for the print medium.

This paper describes the inception and growth of the journal and discusses the range of issues encountered; continuous versus periodic publishing; copyright issues; ensuring coherence and timeliness without any full-time staff and no budget; retaining format flexibility and attracting a readership and contributors. The technical issues faced by the authors will also be discussed; seeking out professional expertise; HTML formatting; adapting document size to suit the downloading capacities of readers; and making the transition from an adapted to a dedicated server.

The authors will argue that far from being a niche enterprise, electronic publishing which brings together policy makers, analysts, activists, academics and others holds much promise as a model for combining strengths, broadening communities and communicating more quickly and effectively across common divides.

## **Background**

Over the last few years, a good deal has been written about the co-ordination of humanitarian assistance as an expression of practical politics. It is a field of some fascination, combining fractious complexity, innocents and antagonists, politics high and low, a dispiriting

number of professions and institutions and frequently, moral urgency. In 1994, two academics and a senior military officer seconded by the UK Ministry of Defence began research in this area from Cambridge University.

While our work throughout 1994-5 focused on the coordination of the UN-civil-military components of humanitarian assistance operations, we were less impressed by deficiencies in coordination mechanisms than by the remarkably poor levels of communication and understanding between groups whose work otherwise gave them such a strong affinity. The levels of mutual incomprehension, even between groups professionally akin, were disturbing and instructive.

The irony in this is that such poor levels of understanding should co-exist with rich levels of information. But more information does not of itself ensure better communication. And what we witnessed in Rwanda, Bosnia and Angola had its counterpart in government departments and headquarters offices.

Yet timely, informative and well-considered material continues to be written. The organisational necessity to produce promotional materials extends to giving public expression - usually in print - to policy-making, analysis and prescription. Academic institutions, the military-academic community, NGOs, government agencies and others have made of peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance a minor industry, by no means confined to book publishing. The difficulty is that the largest part of it travels to only a very few of the constituencies who could most benefit by it. The narrowness of specialisations, the cost of subscriptions and/or postage, a limited range of contacts and a certain inertia might all play their part; regardless, the result is that we spend more time communicating 'in house' than to those who share our endeavours.

We therefore concluded that there was a requirement for a world-wide and near real-time resource, common to policy-makers, practitioners and analysts. Located on the World Wide Web the *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* (JHA)<sup>1</sup> would enable us to post information that could be consulted, shared, responded to and easily re-disseminated - all in the shortest possible time.

In a field of endeavour so often driven by emergencies and assessed in terms of on-the-ground effectiveness, our initiative ran against the grain - at least in terms of our intentions. From the start, we never considered establishing another academic journal, at least in the ordinary sense. We said of JHA that it was to be 'a resource that contained a journal'. However, this determination was formed on the basis of quite hard-edged conclusions reached through our researches and field observations. It is not only that the well-meaning but uninformed abundant goodwill generated by humanitarian emergencies can create as much chaos as order, but that even the range of professional organisations were a 'community' only in the generic sense. After the fighting in Rwanda ceased in the summer of 1994, for example, 130 NGOs descended on the country in a single month. In this and related disasters, one must add national militaries, the specialised agencies of the United Nations, diverse professions and nationalities, conflicting remits, assertions of independence and a poor grasp of shared or related tasks.

We believed that by fostering knowledge and comprehension through the dissemination of information, we could serve the work of humanitarianism before emergencies; and, because of the nature of the medium, possibly the work itself.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*: <http://www-jha.sps.cam.ac.uk>

## Establishing the Journal of Humanitarian Assistance

Of the three self-appointed co-editors, only one had a knowledge and interest in computers beyond the functional; none had any experience in electronic publishing; and although all of us had some nominal experience of using the World Wide Web, no obvious model for designing our journal sprang to mind. We quickly secured an ISSN number and scanned the Web for inspirations, the first of which was *Emerging Infectious Diseases*<sup>2</sup> (since revamped.) This was very helpful in terms of design, but was still a conventional journal in most respects.

Yet although we were ambitious to extend the parameters of journal publishing, the creative leap - conceptualising how we might accomplish this - was difficult. In the end, the most useful piece of advice we received was not at all technical in the usual sense, nor about electronic publishing per se, but about the difference between electronic and print formats. The wisdom of, 'Don't treat it like a horseless carriage' only became apparent as we faced the issues which beset the establishment of a traditional journal: periodicity, copyright and the payment of contributors, circulation, limit on the length of submissions, organisational, professional and national inclusiveness, responsiveness and flexibility. In these and other areas we have been able to employ or adapt the strengths of the electronic medium to keep our operation simple, and useful for our readership.

With the grant money which had funded our research project, we purchased a shop-standard Apple Macintosh for use as a server and, initially, an authoring platform. While two began the hunt for material, one began the business of coming to grips with HTML. It is open to some speculation whether such a naive approach could be countenanced even three years later; in retrospect, however, it does seem that much of the world we encountered was little less green. Not only did we write endless reassuring letters concerning copyright and the possibility of plagiarism (in all probability, a constant which rises only in line with dissemination), but such expertise as we were able to draw on was informal. Indeed, after struggling with an HTML manual to discover how to create documents, David Pocock telephoned two firms advertising computer training to ask for details of their courses. The first could not help at all, but the second asked a good many questions and then offered him a job as one of their instructors!

We established JHA with a very simple structure, with a title page which leads the reader to a few explanatory pages and to the contents page. The contents page offers access to about ten different sections, each with its own contents page, and then to the items themselves. The content varies from pieces a few lines long to entire books complete with footnotes, tables and illustrations. We took a decision to make readers want to access our site because of its content rather than high-impact graphics or sound effects. Despite some urging from the technical experts to the contrary, we did not see producing our type of journal as being a showcase for the use of the very latest non-standard HTML codes. It is surprising how many people are still using very early versions of browsers. Apart from anything else, not all of our readers have T1 connections; many use modems and some even use satellite links from field stations in Africa or similar. For the same reason, we try to keep file sizes to a minimum and split the larger ones into sections of about 64K.

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<sup>2</sup> *Emerging Infectious Diseases*: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/EID/eid.htm>

Although it is now easier to advertise a site, it is paradoxically more difficult to achieve visibility. When we started, we began by faxing or e-mailing people we knew were interested in our specialist area, as well as notifying the two search engines extant at the time. Once we were registered, if a researcher typed in a few humanitarian-related keywords we were routinely near the top of the search engine's list. Now, there are a good many more search engines but even more sites, and recent searches for items in our field, unless our full name is employed, placed us unfavourably within hundreds of sites. However, our log indicates that we get many readers from search engines, and a still greater number from sites which have linked to us - all at their initiative and not at our request. We have also noted that many people come direct to our contents page, which means they almost certainly have it bookmarked - and so are regular readers.

### **JHA after two years**

We began in June 1995 with what was effectively a test pattern - our title page and an announcement. Within a few weeks, we had our first few pages of material and were pleased to register a dozen hits a day. Twenty-one months later, we publish some 710 separate items totalling 8Mb and receive 20,000 hits per month. (The commercial 'break even' mark for a comparable print journal is 250-300 subscriptions.)

The readership is truly international and includes government departments, NGOs, universities, military institutions, elements of the United Nations system and a diverse range of practitioners and researchers, plus a good number behind 'firewalls' - almost certainly large organisations. We believe that at its current size and obvious usefulness, the journal has begun to fulfil its original promise, since it was most important for us to provide a source around which the many nationalities, professions and organisations engaged in humanitarian work could share their knowledge and learn from others. We are now approaching a 'critical mass': the Journal has achieved a high international profile; we have begun to receive professional, unsolicited material; and the readership shows no sign of levelling off.

The electronic format allows us a flexibility and range not open to printed journals, which we have exploited. (Aside from the cost-based advantages: no outlay for marketing, advertising, paper, printing, distribution or postage.) Because the material we publish is wide-ranging and occasionally lengthy or time-urgent, we publish continually rather than to fixed periods. There is only one 'edition' and an archive of older material which continues to be accessible. JHA is entirely open-access and non-subscription, in keeping with the editors' motivation and the nature of the material.

## **Timely material**

One of the unique strengths of JHA is that we are able to post material with little delay; often within twenty-four hours of receipt. This is valuable in itself, but also helps us to attract and sustain a core readership.

There are two types of material served by the journal's speed and international reach: up-to-date field reports and humanitarian jobs.

*1. Field reports:* These include the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs Updates from the Great Lakes Region of Africa; World Food Programme reports; Burundi updates; the UN Information Network Roundup of Main Events from the Great Lakes Region; and a variety of field reports from East Africa, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Zaire.

Taken together, these reports - often daily - serve the calls for 'better early warning' so frequently voiced; in a situation as volatile and complex as that in the Great Lakes region, they are invaluable to practitioners and analysts alike.

*2. International Humanitarian Jobs:* We now advertise regularly for many of the world's larger and best-respected NGOs: Oxfam, Save the Children, CARE USA and the International Medical Corps. We have also advertised for UNICEF, the World Health Organisation, the (UN) Department of Humanitarian Affairs and the International Federation of the Red Cross. It is our intention to become the largest single source for those seeking professional humanitarian field work. The logic behind this ambition is that many of these positions are urgent and a single Internet source will speed the process as well as internationalise the advertising - at no cost to the humanitarian organisations themselves.

We also post the particulars of those seeking work, as well as relevant study opportunities.

## **Raising the profile of humanitarian organisations**

We regard it as an important function of JHA to provide an opportunity for humanitarian organisations of every description to voice their principles or findings [see 'Policy and Briefing documents' below] and generally to enhance their international standing. To date, a wide range of organisations have availed themselves of this opportunity: Oxfam, the International Organisation for Migration, UNHCR, Human Rights Watch, The Centre for Disease Control (Atlanta), WHO, the Refugee Studies Programme at Oxford University and the European Community Humanitarian Office.

## **Policy and Briefing documents**

Much of the material carried in this section could not be produced in a print journal because of its length. The importance of these items is they are either quite basic documentation which stands as a foundation for humanitarian operations - such as 'The UNHCR Handbook for the Military' - or are ground-breaking analyses which need the widest possible dissemination if the phrase 'lessons learned' is to have serious meaning.

A particularly striking example of this aspect of the journal was our ability to post the five-volume 'Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda' report.<sup>3</sup> Within a week of its publication, the print run had been completely taken up. Whatever its current availability, it is also expensive. We are naturally delighted to have received consent to republish it as an open-access document available throughout the world.

## Maintenance and growth

When it was rather more difficult to venture into electronic publishing with little more than a good idea, there were still a surprising number of poorly maintained and out-of-date web sites. As electronic publishing becomes technically easier and more accessible, the number of dead sites is likely to proliferate, but the professional standards are also likely to rise. This will be driven in part by mainstream publishers extending and diversifying into the electronic medium.<sup>4</sup> The point here is that reliability is essential to establishing and holding a readership as much as a reputation.

Our decision to publish continuously has benefits and costs in this regard. The idea accommodated not only the nature of the time-sensitive material, but also the editors' professional responsibilities which preclude full-time commitment to the work. In any event, there is no budget, no staff, and no secretarial or administrative support. But a journal of this kind cannot sit still, and our desire to be of service to the work of humanitarian assistance is sufficient ambition to ensure that we will continue to try to expand the range and depth of the material we carry, as well as the readership we reach. We believe we can accomplish this without the work encroaching on our other responsibilities. Yet the counterpart to the cyclic pressures of quarterly print publishing is a disciplined, routine commitment to securing material, formatting and updating - a different pressure, with its own demands.

Life would have been simpler had we been able to forecast our growth to date, since we would have adopted a very different structure. Currently, if we want to change our format there are more than 1500 links to alter. Our material is accessed via a contents page from ten directories - some of which have changed as our sources and priorities have changed; for example, as Zaire overtook Burundi as an area of immediate concern. However, to try to make navigation easier for our readers, we had included a footer on each document "back to previous page" and "back to contents page". So when Zaire gained its own section, and we moved some existing material there, I had to change the existing links both to the pages and back to the Zaire contents page. But this was not a clear enough warning for us. When we wanted to incorporate the Zaire section back with the other field reports, we were faced with changing all the links yet again. Moreover, when we

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<sup>3</sup> Steering Committee of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (Editor: David Millwood), 1996. *The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience* (5 volumes).

<sup>4</sup> A joint undertaking by Johns Hopkins University Press and the Milton S. Eisenhower Library, *Project Muse* (<http://muse.jhu.edu>) is described as providing 'worldwide, networked subscription access to the full text of the press's 40+ scholarly journals in the humanities, social sciences and mathematics'; MCB University Press (<http://www.mcb.co.uk/mcbhome.htm>) offers the full text of some 100 on-line journals. Both operate on a subscription basis.

decided to refer to a document from two different sections (say, something that concerned both Rwanda and Burundi) then the 'back to previous page' might send the reader to the wrong location.

The solution we plan to adopt to get around this problem is to have standard contents indexes and links on the top and bottom of every document. As an aside, some programs, principally Microsoft's Frontpage, enable the indexes and links to be generated as required from a master document so that only the master document has to be changed to altered every title page. Rather than store documents in subject-specific sub-directories, we shall simply store them numerically (for convenience and ease of access, to save scrolling through a huge list, probably with a limit of 100 files in each sub-directory). This means that we can continue to use relative rather than absolute links - that is, up one directory then to a file instead of to a specific directory and a file. This is slightly quicker to code, and more flexible if we want to change directory locations or names. We wish we had thought of this before we had 800 files to manipulate!

We believe that one person must control what is put up and make the necessary links. To do otherwise risks incomplete or incorrect links and similar errors. There is nothing to stop a journal being split into sections with different people having responsibility for each section, but to have different people amending the same section (assuming it has more than a few pages) is a recipe for chaos.

At the same time as we continue to expand our range of material, many of our sources are also coming on-line, so the question of competition and overlap arises. We are aware that there are some very good home pages currently on the Internet, including those of the humanitarian NGOs. However, we view these not as competitive, but complementary; indeed, we feel that their existence validates our decision to publish electronically. One of the largest factors which inhibits the development of a true community of humanitarian assistance actors is that there is no single medium through which all might teach and learn. In our attempt to establish such a medium, it is not our intention to supersede or bypass the 'electronic profile' of existing organisations and agencies, but to complement them. The difficulty with the variety of institutional and specialist Web sites is that their readerships tend to be self-selecting - that is, those with a pre-existing professional or institutional affiliation. To their credit, most of the organisations we have dealt with recognise this, as well as the importance of making a community out of a disparate group of actors: they are only too pleased to allow us to post their material.

Our log enables us to conduct 'market research' and, although we try to ensure that the Journal is as accessible and useful as possible in terms of subject matter, the 'hit parade' is fascinating - not least because it often confounds our expectations. However, as we consolidate our first two years, we believe that comprehensiveness, rather than specialisation or conforming to a readership trend, will secure a growing readership and ensure JHA's usefulness.

## The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance as a venture in electronic publishing

Although we established JHA without practical knowledge or an explicitly philosophical consideration of the implications of electronic communication, we nevertheless had a clear sense of the venture as an experiment in communication and the dissemination of information. We recognised that in addition to the usual range of political currents operative in any social undertaking, large-scale humanitarian assistance is beset with a problem that impels people to use the phrase 'humanitarian community' euphemistically. Put simply, if the disparate groups of professionals are to function more effectively, they must first recognise themselves as an epistemic community. This entails knowledge shared between as well as within professions, organisations and institutions.<sup>5</sup>

We recognise that the role of JHA is likely to remain small in the scale of the work, but the fact of it - and our knowledge that it has been consulted by the full span of those with a professional interest - is, we believe, an important function; maintaining and furthering it is no less important.

Those who believe that the advent of the electronic journal signals the death of the scholarly (print) journal should consider not only the current vitality of the publishing industry - scholarly books, in particular - but also our psychological and spatial relationship with printed matter.<sup>6</sup> Most of us now receive a large and proliferating number of e-mail messages, but, far from advancing the dawn of the 'paperless office', much of this arrives in addition to more familiar forms of communication. Each enhances the other.

Our own 'resource that contains a journal' approach still appears relatively novel and we are mildly surprised that the electronic journals we do encounter make little use of the opportunities presented by the medium. It is rather like the early film-makers whose theatre backgrounds inclined them to place the camera in a fixed position, with the actors moving in and out of its range. However, our exploitation of some of the possibilities was driven as much by necessity as creative impulse. The formal requirements of producing a standard international journal, together with commercial considerations and the much less frenetic pace at which material arrives for consideration, must all play a part in making the transition from print to screen a simple transfer. There is room and requirement for both, but whether the more experimental formats will come to assume a larger share of the output, and whether in any event they will begin to influence the conception and format as well as the design of more standard journals, is an interesting subject for speculative thought.

Our intention was not to enter competition with other academics, or with existing information providers, print or electronic, nor to add to the growing number of journals. Come to

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<sup>5</sup> See Claudio M Radaelli, 1995. 'The Role of Knowledge in the Policy Process,' *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2:2, June 1995 pp.159-83.

<sup>6</sup> See Jack Goody, 1990. 'Technologies of the Intellect: Writing and the Written Word,' *Memorandum No.5, Projektgruppe Kognitive Anthropologie*, Max-Planck-Gesellschaft; Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, 1988. *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*. San Francisco: North Point Press.



that, we remain slightly bemused to find ourselves the editors of a now considerable and still expanding enterprise, since our main work lies elsewhere - at least for the present. We were conscious, however, that this would be an interesting experiment in communication. There are two direct answers to the question, 'Aren't there already a sufficient number of journals?' For specialists and for those working between existing disciplines or trying to extend the boundaries of sub-domains, the answer is probably not. Yet ask any academic whether they are up-to-date with the journals they know they ought to read and you will most often encounter a cry of despair. Still the problem we encountered, for which the creation of yet another journal was our solution, was less a problem of information than one of dissemination through a common source. We need to emphasise this. This is not a variation on marketing, but an educational undertaking.

It is a challenge, a curiosity and a pleasure to sense that JHA will remain experimental. On one level, our material ensures this, arising as it does from the volatility of the world's trouble spots, the unpredictability of the response, the changing nature of the work, the individual character of crises - and the disposition of the editors. The adaptability of the electronic format allows us to cope with these and other contingencies. At a more profound level, it concerns attracting, securing and engaging a readership - or rather, attempting to get them to engage one another, if only at the level of sharing information.

When we note with surprise that the hits on 'academic articles' exceed one of the sections which could usefully be published only electronically, we know that much though we might regard our success to date, it is only a start. The comfort in this is that even many of the more secure corners of the world have yet to come to terms with email and the Internet, let alone electronic publishing. The term 'global village' rests uneasily beside the easily discernible facts about the conditions under which most of humanity still live. In his last term at Cambridge University, one of the editors supervised 45 undergraduates: only two made an appointment by email; at least a quarter of the essays were handwritten and he has yet to receive an essay by email. The use of the Internet for research is increasing, particularly at postgraduate level, where the requirements of formal research require a student to cast a wide net; yet here, too, use is intermittent.

If our readership can be extended and the material expanded, so too can the experiment. Upon reaching another level in terms of the size of JHA, the editors hope to take advantage of the flexibility of the medium once again to extend our service and enhance the Journal's usefulness beyond accruing material and readers. We have long been aware that our remit and subject matter require us to 'grow or die'; growth in this case is more than a matter of size and perhaps this behoves us to take a more direct interest in the frontiers of electronic publishing.

## **Lessons**

Since our ends drove us to the means, we are naturally diffident to pronounce beyond our hard-won, if somewhat narrow expertise. Nevertheless, there are a number of points which we feel have wide applicability. We are aware that a good many electronic publishing ventures are likely to have full-time staff - trained into the bargain - and that we are running a non-commercial project. The extent to which we are ambitious is the extent to which our hearts are in it.

*Keep it simple* This means not many hands in the actual publishing; and a knowledge of the basics. On the latter point, electronic publishing and relevant software have developed considerably

since JHA was established, but a sound understanding of HTML theory can still make an electronic publisher's life easier. For example, recently we were given a complex academic article to publish, 30 pages long, with tables, graphics and the inevitable footnotes. Although handcoding is loathsome tedium itself, our conversion utility should have been able to do the bulk of the work. However, when converted, the tables ran off the edge of the screen in a continuous flow. Repeated runs of the program made no difference. A trawl through the raw code revealed a missing `</TD>` in the compiled HTML code. Without the basic understanding of HTML, the fault could not have been detectable and the article would have been effectively unusable.

Keeping it simple also means making it easy for readers to navigate a site. We appreciate good graphics and stylish layout and, depending on the nature of the site, these things can be important, even essential. But if they are not - if, for example, the material is essentially academic - it is worth remembering that few readers will wait for the several minutes it takes some graphics to download.

*Plan for growth* This is as much a matter of formatting as machine capacity. It is important to try to ensure that some months or years into a venture the result is not a rigid journal ensconced in a very flexible medium.

*Visibility* A Web site is high-profile, however many hits it gets. If consistent, professional-standard updating cannot be guaranteed, then periodic publishing is a safer option. This is unlikely to be a problem for established publishers moving into the electronic medium, but there seems little point in an institution having designed a home page which then becomes moribund for weeks or months at a time.

*Niche marketing versus 'one-stop shopping'* It was open to us to extend the boundaries of a journal, but to frame our remit more narrowly. We might, for example, have devoted ourselves to the military aspects of humanitarian assistance. Our decision to span the professions, organisations and themes involved was driven by our perception of the need, yet we are now aware that there is probably an advantage in this, in respect of attracting and holding a readership. Without denying the need for focused specialisations, a single large source which contains information of general utility and of great topicality is not only practical for readers; it is in all probability compatible with the psychology of Web use. Publishers who wish to retain the traditional format of their electronic journals might consider siting them within the compass of, say, a database, or some other relevant source of information which underpins them.

## **Conclusion**

Approaching electronic publishing essentially as an extension of academic work, yet with the intention of making a practical contribution to the business of saving lives in humanitarian crises, we initially gave little thought to the larger themes which form the substance of library and information studies, to say nothing of social psychology and sociology. Although our experiment is well-launched, perhaps the largest part of the adventure is still before us. In any event, we are delighted that in the course of trying to serve one community, we appear to have found ourselves in the company of a second. We welcome the opportunity to learn from and to share in the larger enterprise of coming to a clearer understanding of the way information technologies have given us a changed and changing world.

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