Challenges of Having Journal of Agriculture and Food Sciences Online

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Abstract

The Journal of Agriculture and Food Sciences (JAFS) is a platform for researchers and scientists in the field of agriculture, food science and technology, and related socioeconomic issues to publish their research findings. Based in Nigeria and published in English, JAFS is peer reviewed. Reviewers who are drawn from the various disciplines must possess a minimum PhD in the relevant area of study and should be up to the rank of Senior Lecturer. Published twice a year with the maiden issue in March 2003, the date of last issue published is April, 2007. In the beginning, electronic copies of JAFS were available on the web under the auspices of Sichersoft BV., ICT firm based in Hoofddorp, the Netherlands. The website address was www.imsu-jafs.info until 3 December, 2007 when an agreement for JAFS inclusion in African Journal Online (AJOL) was signed. Thus the arrangement with Sichersoft BV, was terminated and the website deactivated. The migration to AJOL was necessitated by the need to be part of a relatively more visible, popular and the world class institutional identity associated with AJOL. However, challenges present themselves at every turn on the road to putting JAFS online. This paper shares such challenges as: paucity of articles; tardiness on the part of the reviewers; preponderance of materials that are not of suitable standard as revealed by the reviewers when the materials are eventually returned. The challenges find expression in delays in meeting publication deadlines. Other challenges include lack of secure and easily accessible electronic storage system of past issues. We look forward achieving full online editorial process.
Introduction

A cardinal function of the University is responsible research and publishing (Diala, 2006). Universities are specially saddled with the responsibility of teaching, research and production of high quality manpower. Through lectures, seminars, symposia, official university publication and the publication of its academic staff, universities inform and influence public opinion and policymakers. In Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria, one of the avenues for publication of research results is the Journal of Agriculture and Food Sciences, (JAFS).

JAFS is a platform for researchers and scientists in the field of agriculture, food science and technology, and related socio-economic issues to publish their research findings. It is dedicated to the achievement of the following objectives:

a. highlight and accentuate contemporary leading issues in agriculture and food sciences;
b. disseminate the nature and solutions of emerging problems in agricultural development food sciences; and
c. act as a forum for the dissemination and discussion of ideas, polices and practices in both public and private sectors as they relate to food and agriculture.

From the fore-going, it can be seen that JAFS is an attempt at ensuring visibility for research output in Imo State University as well as other universities. Based in Nigeria and published in English, JAFS is peer reviewed. Reviewers are academics and researchers in universities and research institutes. They are drawn from relevant disciplines in which they posses a minimum of the PhD. Additionally, reviewers should be up to the rank of senior lecturer or its equivalent, and would have consistently authored contemporarily relevant scientific papers in similar journals. The list of reviewers is updated annually, and is acknowledged in the second issue of each volume. There are two issues in each volume.

JAFS is issued twice a year. These are issued in April and October each year. These two issues make a volume. The maiden issue, volume 1 number 1 was in April 2003. The latest issue was published in April, 2007. As a rule ten articles are required for publication in each issue of the journal.

JAFS’ institutional support is housed in the Faculty of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria. Contributors are required to submit their manuscripts in three hard copies online any time of the year. Contributors are required to pay N1000 for editorial and peer review processes. Two reviewers report on each paper. The outcome of any peer review process can be any of the following:

a. accepted in its present form;
b. accepted with major corrections;
c. accepted with major corrections;
d. not accepted.

The outcome is communicated to the concerned contributor for follow up action. If the manuscript is accepted for publication, the contributor is notified accordingly. Subsequently, the author is expected to pay N12,000.00 for publication. Neither the reviewer nor the contributor knows the identity of the other during the peer review process. For accepted papers, the contributors are expected to make the required corrections and to return to the editors a hard copy and a diskette copy of the paper. For each issue of the journal, some 100 copies are produced for distribution. The copies are distributed as follows:

a. one copy each to the ten contributors;
For online publication, electronic copies were uploaded on the portal of the journal [www.imsu-jafs.info](http://www.imsu-jafs.info), and since this year to African Journals Online (AJOL) following a recent agreement.

The issue

In the beginning, electronic copies of JAFS were available on the internet under the auspices of Sichersoft BV., an Information Communication Technologies (ICT) firm based in Hoofddorp, the Netherlands (http://www.sichersoft.com/about.html). The website address was [www.imsu-jafs.info](http://www.imsu-jafs.info). The abstracts and full text articles of each issue are supplied in electronic format through to Sichersoft who in turn upload the documents to the website address. Under this argument, JAFS was full text online and of open access.

The arrangement with Sichersoft for the electronic publication of the journal suited our purpose then. That was until 3 December, 2007, when an agreement for JAFS’ inclusion in AJOL was signed. Effectively, the arrangements with Sichersoft ended. Committed to improving visibility, sustainability, outreach and reader-awareness, the opportunities offered by AJOL were utilized. The shift to AJOL was necessitated by the need to be part of a relatively more visible, popular and world class institutional identity associated with AJOL. However there are some challenges experienced in JAFS online publication. This paper is intended to share the experiences and challenges of online publication of the Journal of Agriculture and Food Sciences. The remaining parts of this paper are organized into the following headings: challenges; a peep into the future, and summary, conclusion and recommendations.

The challenges

**Inadequate funding:** A major crisis of academic writing (and publishing) in Nigeria is that given depleting funding, Nigerian Universities are no longer uniquely placed to house internationally acclaimed journals (Diala 2007). This constrained financing is reflected in projects that are domiciled in the universities. Lack of funds is a primary challenge in having JAFS online. Further, paucity of funds is a common thread that runs through subsequent challenges mentioned underneath.

**Preponderance of poor quality articles from researchers:** Contributors have to turn in adequate number of papers of acceptable quality so that after review sufficient papers pass the process and are published. Since inception in 2003, JAFS has received about 156 articles from researchers. Of these, only fifty articles or thirty-two percent have successfully passed through the review process. In other words sixty-eight percent of articles did not meet the standard required for publication. This is attributable to the declining quality of scientific research and poor scientific writing skills. Inadequate laboratory facilities impacts adversely on scientific research as well as quality of postgraduate training. Note that JAFS mandatorily publishes ten articles per issue. Waiting to have sufficient articles to make an issue often leads to delay in publication of each issue.

**Preference of some researchers for Journals based in Europe and North America:**
There is a preference for Europe and North America based journals by many researchers. This preference may be related to greater score ascribed to papers published outside Africa as “international” by several Universities. This reduces the patronage and number of articles received. Denying that there are hierarchies of publication outlets is tantamount to intellectual timidity (Diala 2007). Every discipline has and recognizes its most authoritative and prestigious journals. Journals over the years acquire prestige and central roles in their fields through consistent generation and dissemination of high quality scholarly articles produced through rigorous review and evaluation processes. Publishing in such journals is not only career enhancing but also places one’s work before renowned names in the relevant field. However, a journal is not international because it is domiciled in the West. To all intents and purposes, it takes years for a journal to attain respectability. We should therefore decolonize our minds of this international journal mentality. It is hoped that the arrangement with AJOL, our outreach will be greatly enhanced and with it increased inflow of manuscripts for publication.

**Tardiness of the Reviewers:** Reviewers take long time to return comments on manuscripts sent to them. Very often it becomes necessary to periodically remind reviewers before manuscripts are returned. A way round this challenge is to annually update the list of reviewers based on their satisfactory performance. We are also looking into the feasibility of organizing reviewers’ retreats and workshops where the vision and mission of JAFS are shared and constantly kept in view.

**Weak ICT infrastructure:** Challenges of online publication include overcoming any possibility of quality decrease in hard copy, digital amnesia or loss of electronic publications (Missingham 2005). Digital amnesia is attributed to decrease in hard copy, increased electronic communication, such as e-mail and inadequate preservation of it, combined with poor record-keeping and management practices. It should be pointed out that memory is greatly enhanced by frequent and repeated recall; recall is in turn aided by proper storage in the system. A data bank that fills the need for a one stop shop for research purposes is also a requirement for online publishing. Such data bank must offer such services as sourcing, assembling and processing data into systematic storage system for retrieval and utilization. JAFS lacks secure and easily accessible electronic storage system. During the run-up to documentation for JAFS inclusion in AJOL, a request was made for the electronic copies of our past issues. In the period, the website [www.imsu-jafs.info](http://www.imsu-jafs.info) was deactivated. Because there was no dedicated storage facility we naturally turned to the sent folder of our e-mail account and managed to send some files to AJOL. Soon after we received a reply that some of the files sent were blank, some corrupt, yet others were inaccessible. Some files filled the bill though. This graphically dramatizes the dilemma of digital disarray.

**Cost of Hardware and Software:** JAFS is also hamstrung by another digital demon – as Missingham (2005) labels the challenges of online publishing. That is the relatively high cost of hardware and software. According to Henry (2003), financial resources are required for online publishing to sustain an infrastructure of equipment, software and basic services which aid to ensure that intellectual resources are available well into the future. A good lap top sells for some N130,000.00, a good desktop is half that price. Relative to JAFS’ circumstances, this is staggering. Enterprises in less developed countries will not benefit from ICT without access to good managerial and technical skills and innovation (UNCTAD 2004). Added to these are the cost of relevant accessories and the attendant cost of maintenance and upgrading on account of rapid evolution of ICT.

**A Peep in to the Failure**

These challenges have neither impaired our vision nor truncated the mission of JAFS. On the contrary JAFS is evolving ways of standing up to these challenges. They include the following:
(a) With inclusion in AJOL, the frontiers of communication and distribution will expectedly be pushed outwards. This will hopefully address the issue of paucity of articles received for consideration for publication.
(b) JAFS plans to organize retreat for out reviewers during which performances are peer reviewed based as benchmarks.
(c) JAFS is proposing to partner with AJOL to further develop mechanism for online submission and peer review. In this context, JAFS seeks to put in place necessary personnel, materials and infrastructure. Lack of basic infrastructure may remain intractable for sometime to come, because of a perception that funds are slim.

**Conclusion**

This paper has presented the vision and mission of the Journal of Agriculture and Food Sciences (JAFS) as a platform for researchers and scientists in agriculture, food science and technology and related socio-economic issues to publish their research findings. JAFS is based in the Imo State University Owerri, Nigeria and published in English. JAFS first year of publication is March, 2003. Date of last issue published is April 2007. The frequency of publication is twice a year.

At inception, JAFS was available online courtesy of Sichersoft BV., an ICT firm based in Hoofddorp, The Netherlands. The website address then was [www.imsu-jafs.info](http://www.imsu-jafs.info). The arrangement with Sichersoft was adequate for our purpose until end 2007 when an agreement for JAFS inclusion in AJOL was signed. The inclusion of JAFS in AJOL was motivated by the desire to be part of a more invisible, popular and the world class institutional identity associated with AJOL. JAFS’ relationship with AJOL is expected to combat and mitigate the challenges as JAFS looks forward to reaching the enviable level of full online editorial process.

Challenges present themselves at every turn on the road to online publication. These challenges include paucity of articles, tardiness on the part of the reviewers and preponderance of materials unsuitable for publication as revealed by the reviewers’ comments. These challenges find expression in delays in meeting publication deadlines. These challenges have not impaired JAFS’ vision. JAFS looks forward to full online editorial process.

The exchange of ideas through conferences and workshops serves for sharing experience on strengths, opportunities and threats. International donor agencies should aid journals in developing countries overcome the challenges of electronic publishing.
References


