

## The evolving digital ecology

Readers of the *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* may have seen the announcement of the new all-electronic physics journal called the *New Journal of Physics*, (NJP) which is available free to anyone with access to the Web [1]. The publishing partners are the Institute of Physics and the Deutsche Physikalische Gesellschaft. The new journal will be indexed and abstracted by INSPEC and the publishing partners have committed to maintaining unrestricted access to the archive at no charge and in perpetuity. Quoting from the publisher's announcement:

The NJP approach of a high quality, all-electronic journal accessible at no charge to readers provides a real opportunity to chart an innovative and responsible way forward for learned society publishers . . . . We believe that the authors will be attracted to a journal that provides universal access at no charge to readers . . . . Authors should also be attracted by the opportunity to take advantage of the electronic medium for material such as video clips, simulations, supplementary material, additional colour, etc. [2].

The Web is a powerful tool for both authors and publishers and the new physics journal joins a variety of publications taking advantage of this new medium.

The speed of evolution of scientific communication has undoubtedly increased as the new information technologies such as the Internet and Web have become widely available. Hurd captured the essence of the evolving terrain of scientific communication in her excellent chapter entitled "Models of Scientific Communication Systems" in *From Print to Electronic: The Transformation of Scientific Communication* [3], reviewed by Broering in the October 1998 issue of the

*Bulletin* [4]. The new physics journal is possible not only because of the advances in technology and evolving trends in scientific communication, but also responds to forces at work in scholarly publishing. As the publishers acknowledge in the announcement of the *New Journal of Physics*:

At the forefront of our thinking and planning was the clear need to develop other methods of publishing and financing peer reviewed archival journals alongside the subscription-based model which is coming under increasing economic pressure. The steady growth of the physics literature and the rise in journal subscription prices have taken place at a time when these spiraling prices are outstripping library budgets and shelf space [5].

### Will there ever be an electronic *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*?

Reading this editorial in an electronic version of the *Bulletin* would have permitted immediate review of the publisher's announcement in full from which the above quotations were taken, review of a sample of full-text articles from the new physics journal, and access to the entire book review of *From Print to Electronic: The Transformation of Scientific Communication* published in the *Bulletin*. Because selected content of the *Bulletin* is indexed by the National Library of Medicine and appears in PubMed, you might have discovered this editorial by searching on the keyword phrase "digital ecology" from the title of the editorial and have used the hypertext link in PubMed to take you to the full text. A physician on staff at your hospital or a librarian from your local public

library might have found a useful article in the electronic *Bulletin* on-line searching via a PubMed full-text link. None of these capabilities now exist with the exception of a few full-text articles posted to MLANET.

The Institute of Physics and the Deutsche Physikalische Gesellschaft have taken a risk. The physics community might not respond and the new journal will die. Time will tell. The Medical Library Association (MLA) would be taking much less of a risk to launch an on-line *Bulletin* as so much of the infrastructure for the publication of a peer-reviewed, quality journal is already in place. And, there would be much to gain in the form of ease of access to MLA's best publishing, greater visibility for MLA's peer-reviewed scholarly contributions, attraction of additional authors, enhanced competition for other publications issued in an online format, and refinement of MLA's image in the networked environment.

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### References

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5. HAYNES J., op.cit.