

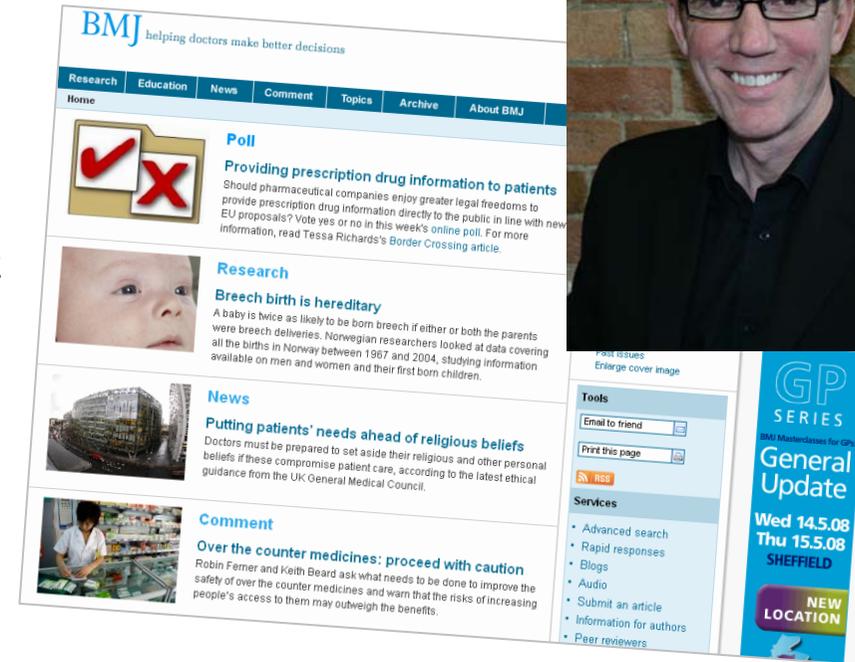
Digital Thought Leaders

Peter Ashman

Publishing Director, British Medical Journal

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“We think less of ‘web visitors,’ and more about the idea of web residents.”



Peter Ashman leads the strategic, commercial and operational development of BMJ Journals and has business responsibility for the Group’s flagship journal, the weekly British Medical Journal (BMJ). He was previously from Nature Publishing Group, where he successfully led the Group’s strategic launch into medical publishing. Prior to that, he was publisher of the British Dental Journal and successfully negotiated the acquisition of the British Dental Association’s entire journal portfolio. Earlier in his career, Peter worked for The Lancet, both in the UK and North America.

The model of peer review is essential for several reasons:

- The stamp of integrity a journal provides acts as a filter for the quality of knowledge in any given market
- The independence of the editorial from any one group of stakeholders prevents commercial stakeholders from manipulating the agenda
- The judgement in front of a jury of peers ensures the most painfully astute model for upholding quality

While Wikipedia fans have been prophesising the death of journals, the weakness is in the channel, not the model. Wikis offer a new channel, but to date they are yet to evolve into tiered hierarchies for editing that can build on the best of peer review. Wikipedia itself may have succeeded in mushrooming to be over fifteen times the size of Britannica, and there may be some elementary spam and abuse management processes in place, but the model remains susceptible to the tyranny of the majority and treats all editors as equal.

What is weak about print? The classic problems are:

- Scarcity of access; although this barrier has softened now journals such as the BMJ make their content available online
- Narrow in content: pagination restricts not only the volume of papers, but also the depth and referencing within each paper
- Slow to publish: that frustratingly sluggish process of drafts, proofs, corrections and production

And this is the climate into which Ashman and an enthused team at the BMJ are deeply engaged. The BMJ is no stranger to digital publishing: back in the mid-nineties they were among the first to embrace the web, there is a stack of awards with their name on, and their models of free access to full text are already ahead of all other mainstream medical journals.

However, after spending time with Ashman, this is clearly just the start. His background in other scientific journals brings a broad perspective of ideas and, like BMJ chief, Dr Michael Chamberlain, he shares a passion for digital channels and the knowledge of how to navigate them.



Meet your Digital Thought Leader

Peter Ashman is Publishing Director, British Medical Journal

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New content for a new channel

"The BMJ online now becomes the definitive version of the title, supplemented by the print edition," explains Ashman. "The dotcom version is more dynamic, with added value features like polls and blogged debates."

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This means an expansion of the scope for the publications, as well as new relationships with readers. "On the web we can themes issues, in ways that are not effective or economic in print."

Community

But will these changes mean a risk to the quality of editorial. "Absolutely not. But does content help us build deeper relationships with readers? Absolutely yes."

Ashman is also clear about the relationship between the brand values and the audience. "The key benefit of having a community is in the brand loyalty they foster".

There's also a new type of thinking in place about audiences and the nature of the relationship with the publisher: "At the BMJ we think less of 'web visitors,' and we're now thinking more about the idea of web residents. We are looking for an audience that comes to us and stays here."

International

What about the international nature of web publishing? The BMJ has always been a global journal and is just as readily found on the shelves in Singapore and New York as it is in London. "Of the 1.1m people coming to the BMJ.com site the vast majority are outside of the UK. They have an enthusiasm to generate content and there will be much more in the way of UGC on our sites in the future."

And what's next

And as for what's coming? For a publisher, Ashman is uncharacteristically open: "Look out for more polls, blogged debates, and now podcasts."

In scientific and medical publishing, the BMJ group will be titles and sites to watch over the next two years. That pioneering spirit from the early nineties is back, and the market is ripe for what they'll deliver.



About the BMJ

BMJ Group is a global medical publisher. BMJ, (British Medical Journal) the Group's flagship journal, was founded in 1840 and is one of the world's leading general medical journals. It provides a wide range of evidence-based medicine products, in print, online and at events, offering the medical community a comprehensive information support system. The BMJ's products and services extend to offer rights and licensing, and targeted advertising and sponsorship opportunities for pharmaceutical and healthcare companies, recruiters, and the general medical community.

Digital Training Academy programmes

Intensive digital marketing and publishing coaching that boosts the effectiveness and productivity of digital teams in media owners, brands and their agencies.



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“I’ve been in digital for many years, but the Digital Training Academy you ran for our senior management has transformed this company. Congratulations.”

Media company board director and participant, in-company Digital Training Academy programme

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Making sense of a digital world

Digital Strategy Consulting Limited & Digital Training Academy Ltd

Tel +44 (0)20 7244 9661

Email Team@DigitalStrategyConsulting.com

Company 4342606

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