

COMMUNICATION MATTERS

The Story of the ISAAC UK Journal

by Sally Millar, 2015

Written while she was still Editor of the Communication Matters Journal

Background

The Newsletter of the UK Chapter of ISAAC, that I now edit was established originally in 1987. I 'inherited', it in 1991.

The Newsletter started out as a very slim volume, put together on a typewriter, laid out by cutting and sticking, and photocopied for distribution. The timing of its appearance was erratic. It did not carry advertising. It graduated in 1990 to being desk-top published on an Apple Mac computer and commercially printed, with a colour on the cover. Due to lack of funds, the colour was later dropped, and the paper weight and quality were reduced.

Communication Matters Today

Since that time, the UK Newsletter has grown and grown. There are three issues per year - spring, summer and winter. At one time it came out quarterly, but this was found to be just too much work. Each issue now usually has between 24 and 32 pages. It currently carries seven full page and three half-page advertisements from British companies who manufacture and/or distribute AAC hardware or software. The money paid by the advertisers covers the printing costs, and most of the other expenses, so that over a year, the UK journal more or less breaks even, financially.

We now call the publication a 'Journal', not a Newsletter, with the name Communication Matters. It has an ISSN number, which means it can be identified as a periodical internationally, throughout all the databases and registers of the publishing world. It carries a Volume number and Issue number (Vol. 10, No. 2), in line with the convention of all academic journals. We currently print 400 copies of each issue. The majority go to members of ISAAC UK (free - as part of their membership subscription). A small number of complimentary copies are given to authors, fellow Chapter Newsletter Editors, and to some countries with emergent AAC programmes. A small number goes to overseas subscribers. We are hoping to arrange that ISAAC members will soon be able to order Communication Matters through their own ISAAC Chapter, paid for in their own currency. Communication Matters is about to become an official ISAAC publication, like Communication Outlook and Communicating Together.

How does it all work?

It took many years before the UK Newsletter really 'grew up' to maturity. There was a long learning curve for me as Editor, (which continues). The production of Communication Matters has always been produced and supported by a team of people: but it has taken some time to work out just how such a team would work best.

At one time there was a large 'Editorial Team'. The idea was that the work of Editor should be shared out evenly amongst a group (all in different parts of the country). In

practice, this didn't work. Occasionally team members helped by generating or producing copy, but they were not clear on their role and were only partly committed. They looked to the Editor to take overall responsibility. They were seldom called upon for true peer review, of articles, since we were usually grateful for any articles we could get at first, and anyway it then became clear that the value of this Newsletter was as a forum for exchange of information, and discussion by the people (i.e. the members) with the people, and was not an academic journal like AAC. (That's not to say that we never have articles well worthy of AAC or other professional journals - we do!)

The other big problem is time. If the Editor was full or part time and paid (and a well-organised person) it would be fine to spend time communicating with Editorial Board members about everything. But as we all know - if you need something done in a hurry, it's faster to do it yourself. Communication Matters always needs doing in a hurry...

Where does copy come from?

Most copy comes from ISAAC UK members and/ or their work colleagues. We always have interesting write-ups of workshop papers after the annual Communication Matters Symposium in September. Most issues have a contribution from AAC users. Although at first I had to work very hard to generate copy, one of the delights of a longer established journal is that now copy seems to roll in more or less unsolicited!

The current system works like this:

I am the overall Editor, and I work for ISAAC UK voluntarily (I also have a full-time job). It works much better having an Editor who works in the field of AAC, rather than an 'admin' person - the network of contacts in the field is in place, there is constant cross-fertilisation of events and ideas, and it's easier and quicker to judge the relevance, significance and quality of articles submitted, and to make any necessary changes. The biggest problem is simply finding enough time for the work, as Editor. I am lucky in that my job in a research unit means that I have the flexibility to organise my own time, and the resources to be able to phone, fax and email people as necessary, and to photocopy and print as required. It would be difficult for someone who was tied to a classroom or clinic all day, or who did not have access to technological resources, to carry out the Editor's role. All the same, 85% of the work is carried out at home in evenings and weekends!

My job is to find / solicit / extort / beg / borrow / steal copy for each issue; make sure it's in an appropriate electronic format; edit spelling, grammar, style and length; check facts or seek 'replies' to controversial points. I have to try to ensure that the subject matter of issues is balanced; I have to monitor the quality and style and the overall 'look' of the journal. I have to coordinate the whole operation, make sure deadlines are met (more or less). I also do a certain amount of writing for each issue - Editor's Letter, Contents, and Diary Dates, routinely, but also sometimes other topical bits to 'fill up' small areas such as book or new product reviews.

On the production side, I have my own Apple Mac SE 30 (the screen is too small!) with Microsoft Word and PageMaker at home, but I use a Laser Printer 630 Pro at

work for the final copy. I have learned desktop publishing techniques the hard way by trial and error. Although I am slow and limited in my skills I can, if necessary, do every single stage of the publishing process myself (though not as well or as quickly as others).

I deal with advertisers myself, directly; marketing and selling space, advising, receiving and processing their copy. At times it seems that it would be better if someone else did this job (if only I could find someone..) but at other times it is plain that it is quite useful for advertisers - who are, after all, also active members of ISAAC UK, and who often contribute editorial copy to the Newsletter as well as advertisements - to have a single, familiar and knowledgeable point of contact.

I also deal directly with the printers. We use a commercial company who have grown to know the publication well over the years and who therefore need minimal instruction, which saves my time and effort. They take laser printed camera-ready copy, and screen-in photos and advertising copy as required. They keep costs to a minimum by using paper, not metal plates.

I am strongly supported by my partner and fellow ISAAC UK member Patrick Poon, who also works voluntarily, on a wide variety of vital tasks such as scanning in text and graphics; translating files (e.g. from PC to Mac); trouble-shooting generally on computing issues; demon proof-reading; fine-tuning of complicated design and DTP layout ; liaising with and invoicing advertisers; stuffing and mailing envelopes to members - and emergency supplies of gin and tonic when the going gets rough!

The basic desktop publishing and artwork is done by Allan Wilson, a work colleague (again, in his own free time, but we have time at work to consult). He is paid by ISAAC UK (£10 per hour).

Overseas subscribers and complimentary copies are dealt with, voluntarily, by Helen Whittle.

We all have the right to claim expenses back from the funds of ISAAC UK, but in practice overall, the ISAAC Newsletter is subsidised by us as individuals and by my workplace, to some extent, over things like phone & fax charges, electricity, printer cartridges, paper, photocopy charges etc. These, along with time borrowed from the working day on occasion are the 'hidden' costs of producing a Chapter Newsletter. These costs are difficult to quantify but should not be forgotten.

What's the pay off

Being a Newsletter Editor is hard work but interesting and rewarding. You get to be one of the first people to hear all the news across the AAC world (academic breakthroughs, technological developments -and gossip!), you widen your circle of friends and professional contacts, you learn all sorts of new and valuable skills (fast!). And it's fun - there's nothing gives you quite such a buzz as seeing your 'baby' come back hot off the press.