The privilege of being the Executive Editor of the longest-running scientific journal in the world raises eyebrows when people ask me what I do, as if it must be unusually tedious to be associated with anything of such longevity, particularly in science which is always on the move. Not so! This is a modern international journal that is always adapting to a changing world and one that attracts high-quality papers at the forefront of biological science. So, as I come to the end of my four year period, a brief review and assessment seems in order.

Historically, the journal was designed to record the Society’s discussion of scientific advances. Today, topics are chosen by the Society’s Hooke Committee using rigorous peer review to inform its annual selection of subjects that are at the cutting edge of research and, which bring the international leaders together. Competition for such meetings, which are generously supported by the Society, is intense. In addition, dedicated theme issues have become increasingly important and now represent the majority of published issues.

Themes can be a topic of your choice, guest-edited by you and your colleagues, published in your name in a journal currently ranked eighth in the ISI category of ‘Biology’ with an impact factor of 4.6. Guest editors can choose the authors and suggest titles of papers to shape the issue as they see fit. Proposals for themed issues emerge spontaneously from the scientific community worldwide, the International Editorial Board and the Editor. Proposals are submitted directly to the editorial office and peer reviewed, as would be expected of a journal in which peer review was invented several hundred years ago!

The journal publishes primarily review papers that focus on synthesis and analysis, though in some cases novel research material is included. We publish papers across the wide range of the biological sciences. As the discipline continues to explode, this has proved increasingly demanding and we have therefore organized the themes to fall with roughly equal frequency into one of the following clusters: neuroscience and cognition (a favourite of my predecessor, Semir Zeki); organismal and evolutionary biology; molecular, cellular and developmental biology; and health and disease. A striking feature of the past four years has been the growth in access to article downloads. In January 2004, it was only 1500 but now it is approximately 25 000 per month. Lead authors in 2005–2006 came from North America (36%), UK (38%), continental Europe (15%) and rest of the world (11%). Open access is freely available after 12 months.

The ever-increasing interest in publishing in this journal has led to a growth in the number of issues in the pipeline. As a result we have started to publish issues online in advance of print publication to allow our authors an early citation date, provide our readers a wider variety of new content and give us more flexibility in our print publication schedule. Furthermore, publishing electronic supplementary material online has become popular with authors who have a large amount of additional archival data that are of interest to the research community. A good example of this was the paper on elephant placentation (Allen 2006).

The Publishing Board recommended that from January 2008 the journal will be published twice monthly for the first time in its history and I am pleased to report that slots in 2008 are already taken. Much credit is due to the great skill of my Publishing Editor, James Joseph, who has been a tower of strength in getting material in on time and preparing it for publication with exemplary imagination and determination.

I would also like to thank most warmly everyone who has contributed to the journal during my tenure, the publishing section for their unflagging support and professionalism, and the Council for the enjoyment and further education associated with the role of Executive Editor. It is a special pleasure to note that the journal will pass to my very able and distinguished successor, Prof. Georgina Mace, and I take this opportunity to wish her every success.

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December 2007

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Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B (2007) 362, 2185–2186
doi:10.1098/rstb.2007.2228
Published online 12 October 2007
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