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From the Academic Editor

The Possible Futures of *MEJ*

by Patrick K. Freer, Georgia State University, Atlanta

Abstract: The academic editor of *Music Educators Journal (MEJ)* outlines and discusses implications of the decision process involved with the shift away from print to a primarily electronic *MEJ*. The article ends with considerations for the future of *MEJ* as a uniquely democratic institution within the National Association for Music Education.

Keywords: finances, *MEJ*, *Music Educators Journal*, NEB, online, transition

Our flagship professional journal is in jeopardy.

Music Educators Journal (MEJ) is not in jeopardy because it is now a fully online publication. *MEJ* is in jeopardy because of the decision process that preceded the shift away from print.

It is important to keep the two points separated. The *MEJ* Editorial Committee has, for several years, advocated the development of an enhanced online presence for the journal.¹ The purpose of this article is to outline what is known of the decision process, detail the immediate effects of that decision process, and suggest a pathway forward. First, though, we need to reflect momentarily on the original purpose of *MEJ* and how it has directly benefited our field.

The Purpose and Effect of *MEJ*

Print copies of *MEJ* and its predecessors have been distributed as broadly as possible for 102 years. The journal began as a free pamphlet and was later made available for a small subscription fee. Our National Association for Music Education (NAfME) membership dues have included receipt of print copies for 86 years, since 1930.² This was pragmatic: it provided all members with the latest news, pedagogical information, and scholarly articles—each necessary for the building and strengthening of our profession.³ Over time, receipt of *MEJ* became the only remaining tangible element of association dues experienced equally by all members, whether they were third-grade general music teachers in Alaska or university professors in South Carolina. Copies of *MEJ* regularly arrived in member mailboxes, and they instantly provided a sense of association ownership, the communication of professionalism, and the extension of collegiality to all. This was the vision of our association's founders, and it has been an unquestionable success—a success unmatched by any other music education association in the world. Music education in the United States has endured and flourished precisely because of *MEJ* and its uniquely democratic print distribution.

The End of Print Distribution

Members of the editorial committee, including me, learned about the decision to cease print distribution of *MEJ* in the same e-mail announcement received by all NAFME members on August 29, 2015.⁴ Though I had been involved in conversations with NAFME president Glenn Nierman and NAFME chief operating officer Michael Blakeslee (on February 18 and March 8, 2015), these discussions about a shift away from print were nonspecific and hypothetical. In fact, the decision to cease print distribution had been made months earlier; it was communicated to the NAFME state presidents in meetings during November 2014. In those meetings, the state presidents were given the impression that the changes had been vetted and approved by the *MEJ* Editorial Committee. That was not the case.

The final decision to cease print distribution was made by members of the National Executive Board (NEB). There is no question of the NEB's authority to make the decision, but there is a question about why no person directly involved with *MEJ* or NAFME's other scholarly journals was invited to the conversation. Again, I have been told that NEB members were given the impression that the pending changes had been vetted through the *MEJ* Editorial Committee. This was not the case.

The Missing Transition Period

As stated earlier, it is important to make a distinction between the process that led to the decision and the decision itself. The *MEJ* Editorial Committee has been generally supportive of a transition to a fully online journal. The problems here, though, were threefold: (1) we were neither informed that a final decision had been made nor that an effective date had been chosen, (2) the promised "multidimensional experience" afforded by enhanced online capabilities had been neither defined nor negotiated with our publisher,⁵ and (3) there was no transition. In contrast, when the College Music Society decided to move the *College Music Symposium* to an all-online format, the decision was made several years prior to implementation; the intervening time was used to envision the optimal platform, develop standards and guidelines for content, and plan for a seamless transition.

None of that happened in the case of *MEJ*. Instead, we received the first information about file formats and sizes on March 13, 2016, more than six months after the August 29 announcement and after the first nonprint issue of *MEJ* had appeared online. Editorial standards and author guidelines for *MEJ*'s audiovisual media content have not been finalized. As of today, our online presence is exactly the same as when we first "went digital" in September 2008, including the frustratingly complex process of viewing journal content.⁶ How many people, especially millennials, have the patience to click on the requisite seven (or more) links and enter their NAFME identification number/password combination before finally gaining access to our online content? We know the number of those who are successful: there were 5,806 online views of *MEJ* articles in January 2016. On the contrary, we have absolutely no idea how many NAFME members and friends have stopped reading *MEJ* simply because it is no longer distributed in print and is achingly difficult to access online. How many of those lost readers might we have retained with a carefully planned transition process?

The Result

And, most urgently, the lack of a planned transition has had a profound effect on manuscript submissions. In what is proving to have been a dreadful public relations move, the final print copies of *MEJ* (December 2015) arrived in mailboxes with a large banner proclaiming, “This is your last print issue. Print copies will be available as an additional subscription.” What happened? Manuscript submissions all but ceased, literally overnight. Where we have consistently had ten to twelve manuscripts in review at any given point, we now have only a single manuscript in review—for the first time since record keeping began in 2008. From 2009 to 2015, an average twenty-one new manuscripts were received in the first quarter of each year. In 2016, we received only eight new manuscripts in the first quarter, a decline of 69 percent from the same period in 2015. In March 2016, more than three weeks passed without a single manuscript submission—again, for the first time since record keeping began in 2008. At this rate, we may not be able to publish a full 2016–2017 volume year of article content.

Authors stopped submitting manuscripts to *MEJ* when the “This is your last print issue” banner appeared. Perhaps this is because writers have wished for their articles to be printed in the physical copies of our journal. Perhaps writers have valued the chance that every music teacher in the United States would open *MEJ* at lunch and read their article. Perhaps that can still happen with a fully online journal.

But, we needed leadership. A substantial change like this, one affecting every single NAFME member, required a well-researched, highly purposeful period of transition. A proactive transition would have included opportunities to seek guidance from a wide array of stakeholders, including readers, writers, editors, and reviewers. A transition would have prevented potential misunderstandings and would have resulted in specific plans for a seamless changeover from print. Members of *MEJ*'s editorial committee, all dues-paying NAFME members, would have been ideally suited to conceptualize and administer this kind of a transition. Instead, none of that occurred, and the results have placed our flagship journal in jeopardy.

Teaching Music, MEJ, and Finances

And then there is the problem of *Teaching Music*, now the sole print publication of our association. Earlier in this article, I mentioned that *MEJ* had been the only NAFME journal in print form that reached all NAFME members. Some might argue that *Teaching Music* also fills that role. Yes, *Teaching Music* is printed and mailed to all NAFME members, but the similarities to *MEJ* stop there. *Teaching Music* is a magazine produced by In Tune Partners that contains only minimal content generated by music educators, while the academic content of *MEJ* is rigorously peer reviewed to assure quality and accuracy. NAFME members receive printed copies of *Teaching Music* as a benefit of association dues, while printed copies of *MEJ* now require an additional \$20 subscription (there are currently 3,461 of these subscribers). *MEJ*'s editorial committee voted in 2014 to oversee the professional content of *Teaching Music* in an effort to improve its quality, but the offer was immediately dismissed because it would have interfered with the financial aspects of the In Tune partnership.

Indeed, the finances of *MEJ* publication and postage have been central to the life of our journal since inception.⁷ Advertising dollars have been a frequent source of concern, in terms of both dollar generation and related philosophical questions about the impact of advertising and the influence of advertisers. The August 29, 2015, e-mail announcing the end of *MEJ*'s print distribution stated, "Financially, your association is saving some money by this change. The saved funds will be used to support other programs, notably the building of a fund for more research useful for the pedagogical and policy support of music education."⁸ Glenn Nierman echoed this point during his March 17 speech in Atlanta to attendees at the Music Research and Teacher Education National Conference. Based on numbers provided in an e-mail by Michael Blakeslee, the elimination of print distribution will generate savings of approximately \$46,000 per each of four issues (\$184,000 annually). Of that, \$25,000 is designated for the research fund described above. That leaves \$159,000 in annual savings beyond the research fund contribution. Blakeslee states that these funds will be directed "to expenditures most likely to move us to fulfillment of our Strategic Plan."⁹

Communication of the Decision

In retrospect, the problematic leadership process that led to this point was evident at the conclusion of August 29's end-of-print announcement.¹⁰ That letter opened with the greeting, "Dear Music Educator." It was unsigned. Well, that's not entirely true. It closed with, "Regards, National Association for Music Education." Instead of closing with the name of an elected NAFME representative or staff administrator, the letter closed with my name. And your name. And the name of the music teacher in the next town. NAFME is you and me—it is our association. Our association failed to provide the transparent leadership necessary for key stakeholders to contribute to the decision and its implementation.

Moving Forward

Because of this, our flagship professional journal is in jeopardy. We must move swiftly and carefully to re-secure a thriving future for *MEJ*. Similar stewardship and thoughtful decisions over the course of a century led *MEJ* to become the world's most widely read music education journal. Two new research studies independently rank *MEJ* as one of the most influential journals in the history of music education, with a significant increase in influence since 2006.¹¹ This momentum must not be squandered.

We must overcome the current deficit in manuscript submissions. We must regain the readers we have lost who will otherwise never seek *MEJ* content online. We must have strategies and we must have plans. I call on the elected and hired officials of NAFME to develop a transition plan to lead from where we are now to where we wish to be with regard to *MEJ*'s reach, accessibility, and format. We need to discover why authors are no longer writing for our journal and address the problems we find. In short, we need to position *MEJ* to remain the unifying force in our profession that it has been for the past 102 years. As previous editor Edwin B. Birge wrote in 1933,

Since the first issue, some twenty years ago, the magazine has been an important and increasingly powerful factor in the school music development. It is, and will

continue to be, the backbone of the nationwide promotional and protective force which, through the Conference [NAfME], operates automatically for the benefit of everyone interested in music education. *Journal* prestige is unquestioned.¹²

The shift away from print distribution of *MEJ* was more than a change in format. It produced, at least temporarily, a change in purpose. *MEJ*'s hallmark was its availability and accessibility to all NAfME members. Online distribution technically does not change those parameters. It does require a significant nurturing of our constituent readers and writers to ensure that they want to seek online access, that the content is easily accessible, and that the published material is informative, provocative, insightful, and artful. NAfME members may yet again find *MEJ* to be the center of our professional dialogue. But we need leadership to bring us back to that point.

Postscript

Finally and personally, this was an extremely difficult article to write. I have spent many hours reading all commentaries and columns by the previous editors of *MEJ*. I offer this article with an unyielding sense of obligation to those who toiled to create, sustain, and advance *MEJ* for more than a century. I hope for another 102 publication years of our uniquely democratic journal.

Notes

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5. Ibid.
6. MENC, "MEJ Goes Global." *Music Educators Journal* 95, no. 1 (2008): 9.
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