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Editorial

**Editorial: The past, present, and future of
*Demographic Research***

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Editorial: The past, present, and future of *Demographic Research*

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“You don’t have to strive for perfection; excellence will do!”

– Jan M. Hoem (editor, 1999–2006)

Abstract

As *Demographic Research* reaches 20 years of activity, encapsulated in 40 volumes freely accessible online, four of the editors who have led the journal during the period 1999–2019 reflect on its past, present, and future. The journal is a source of deep pride and passion, which we hope is shared by our whole community of readers, authors, reviewers, and editors. As we prepare for the next 20 years of this fascinating journey with *Demographic Research*, we look at the elements which have made the journal what it is today, and we consider how to meet the challenges of the future. We only deeply regret that the late Professor Jan M. Hoem (editor in 1999–2006) could not join us in this editorial endeavour.

1998–1999: Getting started, looking ahead

Griffith Feeney (editor, 1999)

Jim Vaupel told me of his ideas for a new online journal shortly after he was appointed Founding Director of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR) in 1996. I had recently been captivated by Paul Ginsparg’s story of the Los Alamos

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preprint server and responded enthusiastically. So it was that I worked with the MPIDR development team for about a year, beginning in the summer of 1998. I was effectively 'Startup Editor', though this was not my title.

Starting an electronic journal raises issues that do not exist for print publication. It was clear that articles should be provided as PDF files, for example, but should we also provide them in HTML, the native format of the World Wide Web? The initial idea was that we should, but after some experimentation Nancy Vaupel, then Managing Editor, asked me whether the benefits of HTML were worth the labour required. I thought not, and we decided to go with PDF only.

The journal-to-be had not yet been launched and was not receiving submissions, so I decided to try to think through some fundamental issues raised by electronic publication. It is worth remembering at this point how technology has completely changed our world over the past half century. My graduate student days began by walking to campus. Libraries provided access to the raw materials of research, printed books and journals. The workhorses of data processing were large, heavy, noisy electromechanical calculators. The campus computer centre provided a mainframe computer for a few specialized tasks; it was accessed via stacks of punch cards and large format computer printouts. I communicated with local colleagues face-to-face and by telephone, and with others by telephone or letter. Long distance calls were expensive, international calls exorbitantly so.

Now I begin my days by booting my internet-connected personal computer and checking email. Free online resources provide much of what I used to find in libraries. My modest laptop is vastly more powerful than the old mainframes, and I can use it to call (or even video call) people around the world. My consulting work requires travel to national statistical offices in many countries, and I sometimes visit international research institutes, but the epicentre of my world is not a campus, but the internet.

One consequence of this global internet connectivity is a radical democratization of access to knowledge. Most of us probably view this as positive, but democracy is not universally popular, and our enormous dependence on the internet is problematic. We know the benefits; we need to consider the risks as well. One risk is the ability of national governments to restrict access. This is ironic, given that the internet was conceived in part as a communication system which could survive a nuclear war. A second risk is suggested by the recent proliferation of cyberattacks against an ever increasing array of targets by an ever increasing diversity of state and nonstate actors.

Nicholas Negroponte neatly captured the essence of the changes we are talking about as a transition from 'atoms' to 'bits'. A print-published journal article consists of atoms. A computer file containing the same article consists of bits. The enormous advantage of bits is the ease with which they may be modified and transported. It

occurred to me that this ease of modification might be exploited for pernicious as well as for positive ends.

In this perspective, print has an inherent and powerful advantage over digital publication. Imagine a nefarious actor, intent on corrupting the content of a published paper, perhaps in order to change conclusions for political ends. If print-published copies of the journals are contained in scores of libraries world-wide, successful corruption requires, first, near-simultaneous physical access to all copies and, second, the ability to corrupt texts undetectably. This is effectively impossible, *ergo* traditional print publication in widely distributed journals is intrinsically very secure.

If a published article exists only as computer file on a single computer, the security of that publication is non-existent. We read weekly of successful cyberattacks on computers that should be secure but are not. This is not to say that electronic publication is a bad idea – it is, emphatically, a glorious idea – only that it poses risks that must be recognized and addressed.

I thought about this security issue at the time, though I do not remember its coming up in discussions. I enjoyed my start-up editor work immensely and felt well suited to the role. As the time for launch approached, however, I realized that I was less enthusiastic about the continuing work of managing submissions.

Jim responded with his typical grace and effectiveness, and the *Demographic Research* community is exceptionally fortunate that Jan Hoem became editor in 1999. I had met Jan in 1969, when he was a post-doc and I was a graduate student at UC Berkeley. Both readers of *Skandinavisk Aktuarietidskrift*, we struck it off. It is a great sadness that he is not with us for this anniversary. Let us celebrate the profound and continuing influence of his contributions as founding editor.

2006–2011: Transitions and continuity

Nico Keilman (editor, 2006–2011)

One day during the spring of 2006, Jan Hoem, the editor of *Demographic Research*, called me. I had known Jan since the early 1980s. At that time, he had already made several important contributions to statistical demography and had strong opinions about the way demographers should report statistical results (Hoem 2008).

Jan asked me to help the MPIDR and to co-chair, together with Betty Thomson of Stockholm University Demography Unit (SUDA), the Journal Advisory Board of *Demographic Research*, entrusted with two specific tasks. First, to assess the journal since its start in 1999 through its current state. Second, to find a new editor, because Jan had decided to step down as editor later in 2006.

Betty and I, together with Michael Murphy, France Meslé, and Daniel Lichter, did a sample survey among members of the IUSSP, the PAA, and the EAPS. We wanted to identify the journal's strong and weak points, so that we could find out how to improve it. We also received important additional information from the staff at the MPIDR who had assisted Jan in his work for the journal: Renée Flibotte-Lüskow, Jana Tetzlaff, Silvia Leek, Dirk Vieregg, and Peter Wilhelm.

Our main conclusions, based upon the data from the editorial office, together with the opinions of 536 persons who responded to our survey, were as follows:

- *Demographic Research* was found to be a good and useful journal. Close to 80% of the respondents rated the average quality of the journal as good or excellent. When asked how useful the journal was for their own work, they rated *Demographic Research* as 7.2 on average (on a scale from 1 to 10) – only slightly lower than *Population and Development Review* (7.9), *Population Studies* (7.7), or *Demography* (7.6).
- Submissions were numerous, and the flow was increasing. After an initial period with few submissions, in 2005 *Demographic Research* received as many submissions as *Demography*, and the numbers continued to increase in 2006 and early 2007.
- A further strong point was that *Demographic Research* was (and still is) a free, online, worldwide journal. Articles that are freely available on the Internet have greater impact. Open-access articles are cited earlier and more often than non-open-access articles.

Our board recommended a number of changes. The most important one concerned the decision procedure. Until the autumn of 2006, the review system counted reviewer recommendations as one of three types of “votes” (accept, revise and resubmit, or reject), and in most cases the decision followed automatically from the votes. The advantages of such a system were its short processing time, and the fact that the editor did not have to be an expert for all submitted papers. Its disadvantages were that not all reviewers took their task equally seriously, and that they selected the papers they wished to review themselves, on a volunteer basis which could be sporadic. Therefore, we proposed a non-automatic procedure, in which review reports would be the primary basis for decision, but in which the final decision would rest with the editor.

Jim Vaupel, in his capacity of publisher of *Demographic Research*, and Jan Hoem accepted our recommendations. In addition, they invited me to become the new editor and implement these proposed changes. It did not take me very long to accept their kind invitation, and I started as the new editor on 1 October 2006.

During the years that followed, I thoroughly enjoyed working for the journal, following Jan's original credo: "Have a message – State it – Write nothing else". A group of dedicated associate editors assisted me in this task: Gabriele Doblhammer, Jutta Gampe, Alexia Fürnkranz, Elizabeth Thomson, Andy Hinde, Carl Schmertmann, Fran Goldscheider, and John Casterline. However, we would not have been able to do this without the help of Renée Flibotte-Lüskow and Jana Tetzlaff at the MPIDR. I discovered very quickly that respondents of the evaluation survey were right when they listed such characteristics as 'outstanding', 'extraordinary friendliness', 'constructive', 'efficient', 'grace and humour' when we had asked them to give their opinion about the staff at the editorial office. At present, my experience as a reviewer and (sometimes) author is that this still holds for the current editorial staff: Jana Tetzlaff and Francesca Alviani.

Happy 20th anniversary to *Demographic Research* – reading it will continue to be a pleasure for many years from now, I am sure!

2012–2018: Growth and deepening commitment to open science

Carl Schmertmann (editor, 2012–2018)

Nico Keilman had developed a vibrant, growing journal. Submission numbers were rising steadily. The growing inflow of excellent papers on a wide range of topics meant that *Demographic Research* could continue to improve as a general-interest journal with very high standards.

Since its inception the journal had pioneered what we now call "platinum open access" in scientific publishing – no fees to submit, publish, read, or share content. As an online journal, *Demographic Research* had also created a space for nontraditional contributions, such as short descriptive articles, datasets, and computational tools.

Demographic Research extended this commitment to open access by establishing data and code sharing as the default expectation for empirical articles, and by identifying contributions which met this expectation with a "Replicable" badge on the journal's website. Our first official Replicable paper, by Jennifer van Hook and James Bachmeier, was published in July 2013. Since then the collection (accessible directly at https://www.demographic-research.org/volumes/replicable_articles.htm) has grown to over 180 papers. It represents a tangible commitment by *Demographic Research*, and by our field, to building a culture of openness and transparency in scientific research.

The journal also expanded publication of non-traditional articles, via redefinition of 'Descriptive Findings.' *Demographic Research* established word and data limits for this submission category, in order to encourage authors to contribute shorter papers

with intriguing empirical discoveries. This initiative remains a work in progress. Because editors, reviewers, and readers are used to longer articles with more context and synthesis with previous findings, it has not been easy to establish a consensus about standards for shorter contributions. Our discipline, however, needs space for more rapid publication of shorter articles, and *Demographic Research* has continued to promote and develop this approach.

Thanks to Publisher Joshua Goldstein and the IT Department of the MPIDR, *Demographic Research* got a new look in 2013. A complete website makeover included not only new graphical elements, but also added features – current news items for demographers, highlighted content, author profiles, quick links to Editor’s Choice and Replicable articles, and a “Letters” feature through which readers could offer quick reactions to published content. At the same time *Demographic Research* expanded its social media outreach by regularly publicizing articles (old and new) via popular forms of social media, e.g., Twitter ([@demographicres](https://twitter.com/demographicres)) and Facebook (www.facebook.com/DemographicResearch).

Another significant change was the long-awaited inclusion of the journal’s content in JSTOR. This was the fruit of much hard work, carried out under Jan Hoem’s editorship, to get the journal into the mainstream of academic publishing, indexing and bibliometrics. Discovery of articles from *Demographic Research* through JSTOR searches should make our authors’ work much more visible to a larger community of readers, including those outside of demography and the related social sciences. This was a big step toward establishing the journal’s permanence as a major publication.

2018 onwards: *Demographic Research* today and tomorrow

Jakub Bijak (editor since 2018)

In the twenty years since its inception, *Demographic Research* has firmly established itself as one of the top journals in demography and population sciences, renowned for its open access ethos, formal rigour, and the spirit of innovation. For all these reasons, I was both thrilled and honoured by the offer to take over the helm of the journal from Carl Schmertmann in 2018. Because of its vibrancy, *Demographic Research* is a fascinating journal to lead: We are currently positioned in the top quartile of demographic journals according to [Scimago](https://scimago.com), with sound performance metrics across the board. We publish about a hundred papers per year – less than a quarter of all submissions. Despite ever-increasing numbers of submissions, we strive for short waiting times: with an average of 30 days to the first decision and four months to publication, the turnaround is very competitive.

We are actively responding to the current challenges facing demography as a discipline, and academic publishing in general. In substantive areas we have responded to the discussions about (im)proper uses of p-values in applied statistical work (Wasserstein et al. 2019), issues which had been flagged by our journal's editor before (Hoem 2008), and to the concerns about a lack of theory in demography (Burch 2018). As set out in the recent [Editorial](#), we encourage statistical, formal, and theoretical rigour in article submissions and provide authors with formal guidance to that effect.

From the publishing side, we are ready for the open access requirements of [Plan S](#), and are currently working on full alignment with the standards of the Committee for Publication Ethics (COPE). As mentioned in Carl's reflection above, since 2013 we have been at the forefront of the efforts to encourage the replicability of empirical work: we now provide a [Replicable badge](#) to articles which meet our expectations, and explicitly encourage submitting Replications of existing studies. In addition, building up on the early ideas of Jim Vaupel and Jan Hoem, we still publish a wide range of non-traditional papers, from Reviews, to Reflections, to Research Materials, not to mention our innovative approach to Special Collections, of which 25 have appeared so far.

Forecasting in demography is fraught with uncertainty; it used to be said that roughly 20 years was the limit for a reasonable forecast horizon (Keyfitz 1981). For that reason, it is difficult to predict what the next 20 years of *Demographic Research* will bring. We expect new challenges, but will also no doubt see many ground-breaking publications and exciting research avenues. Still, some things remain under our control, and are therefore better predictable. To that end, we will do our utmost to ensure that our commitments to openness, innovation, and scientific rigour will remain the key defining features of *Demographic Research* in the years to come.

One thing is certain: *Demographic Research* would not exist if not for its community: readers, authors, reviewers, editorial staff members, and editors, past and present, to all of whom the journal is indebted for their contributions. In particular, it is difficult to imagine the journal as it is now without the steady hand, work ethos, and sense of humour of the Managing Editor, Jana Tetzlaff, who – together with Alexandra Hähnert in the past, and now with Francesca Alviani, who has joined us recently – form the best editorial team any journal can hope for. Needless to say, large credit for the smooth functioning of the journal and for ensuring the quality of our publications goes also to the fantastic Associate Editors – the current team includes Charles Becker, Agnieszka Fihel, Jutta Gampe, Erin Hamilton, Charles Hirschman, Trude Lappegård, Neil K. Mehta, Jenny Trinitapoli, Jan Van Bavel, and Elizabeth Wildsmith.

Last but not least, *Demographic Research* would not exist in its current form if not for the generosity of the Max Planck Society and the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, which has been publishing the journal since its creation, enabling open access to high-quality publications long before it had become a topic of

wider scientific debate. For that, sincere thanks go to our Publishers, from Jim Vaupel to Joshua Goldstein and Mikko Myrskylä. With such a great team and community in place, we can look forward to the next 20 years of the journal's existence with great excitement and hope for many more new demographic discoveries.

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