

Deliberate Omission of Explicit Citations
of Textbook Errors
Is Irresponsible Science Communication

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One admirable feature of the *Journal of Chemical Education* is a column called "Textbook Errors". Its stated purpose is "to prevent the spread and continuation of errors . . ." That admirable objective is vitiated by an editorial policy which has always troubled me. "Since the purpose of this column . . . is not the *evaluation* of individual texts, the sources of errors *will not be cited* (italics mine)." This is a misguided "courtesy" to authors and publishers that has no place in science. Any author worthy of the appellation "scientist" should demand the explicit citation of the errors in question.

The fate of critical notes like "Textbook Errors" or author corrections, before publication of the *Science Citation Index*[®], was generally one of oblivion. Fifteen years ago Thomasson and Stanley stated the problem quite succinctly:

"Buried in scholarly journals, critical notes are increasingly likely to be overlooked with the passage of time, while the studies to which they pertain, having been reported more widely, are apt to be rediscovered."¹

The matter becomes rather critical in the case of textbooks since most are "reported more widely" than any journal article is ever likely to be, and they are "rediscovered" every day by the

students and scholars who use them.

The puzzling hesitancy to cite the errors being corrected caused me to write² the editor of the *Journal of Chemical Education* pointing out the disservice to authors of the corrected item and to the scientific community in general. The unpublished letter stated that: "If you did provide the sources of errors, their citations would be included in the *Science Citation Index*. Anyone who looked up the textbook in question in the *SCI*[®] would be led to the *Journal of Chemical Education* as a source of correction. I should think the authors of such textbooks would be grateful for this, until subsequent editions of their books are published. Who are you trying to protect?"

The Weinberg Report³ and other surveys of the information problem have stressed the need for responsibility by all within the system of scientific communication to reduce the noise in the system and I find it hard to understand why a journal published by a leading professional society should take the position it does. The practice is certainly as reprehensible as, or worse than the failure of journalists to cite their sources of information when reporting scientific advances.⁴

1. Thomasson, P. & Stanley, J.C. *Science* 121:610, 1955. [Thomasson and Stanley were commenting on C. Zirkle's discussion of the use of fraudulent data, in *Science* 120:189, 1954.]
2. February 20, 1970.
3. Science, government, and information; the responsibilities of the technical community and the government in the transfer of information. A report of the President's Science Advisory Committee. Washington, D.C., 1963.
4. Garfield, E. Citations in popular and interpretive science writing. *Science* 141:392, 1963.