

The Pulling Power of *Current Contents*
and the Reward System of Science

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In advertising, one commonly refers to the *pulling-power* of an advertisement, of a mailing campaign, or even of a promotional gimmick like Chinese fortune-cookies with enclosed advertisement slogans.¹ In the early days of *Current Contents*®, we had some difficulty convincing editors and publishers of CC®'s pulling-power as an advertisement of their journals. Today few people doubt that CC's pulling-power is indeed considerable. But it is a claim that is not always easy to prove. But occasionally something unique happens to justify the assertion.

Recently, a letter of mine² appeared in *Nature*. Immediately following it was a letter from E.F. Hartree about the reprint problem.³ Hartree seems to complain that the listing of a recent article in CC had caused more than 2,500 people to write for reprints of his report on a new method of protein analysis. (I hesitate to identify the paper more closely, lest he receive another 2,500 requests.) However, he should understand that when one picks a hot subject, one must expect a warm response.

We have previously received such "complaints" directly, rather than through a letter-to-the-editor of *Nature*. Doth Hartree protest too much? A French scientist, though very happy about the response to his paper, informed me that his supply of reprints

had long since been exhausted, and that he could no longer afford the postage required even to acknowledge with regrets the requests that still continued to arrive. He wondered whether we might publish an announcement to that effect in CC, as the only effective counter-measure--fighting fire with fire. And within the month, an engineer has written me to complain of a similar dilemma, made worse because his publisher provided him no reprints at all!

I am not unsympathetic to these authors' problem. But surely it is a non-problem easier to live with than most, and certainly preferable to the real problem of complete indifference. When your subject surprisingly interests the faculties of all the invisible colleges, you must simply accept the ignominy of instant fame and muddle through the financial distress of supplying the reprints requested.

We have not yet established any firm correlation between reprint requests and citation rates. As I've reported before, the sociologists regard citation as a form of "reward".⁴ The sociologists are canny fellows. By rather devious survey methods, they have concluded that it gives us satisfaction to find our work cited by others. That event may be foreshadowed by a reprint request--itself a form of "reward."

Another interesting aspect of the reprint system is suggested by Hartree's letter. When you publish in a low-circulation journal covered by CC, will you get more reprint requests than if you had published in *Science* or *Nature* or *New England Journal of Medicine*? One would think that more requesters have access to any issue of such journals, and to a photocopying service. Why go to the trouble and expense of writing for a reprint? Hartree's implicit answer to the question is food for thought. In distributing his supply of reprints, he gave preference to those who he was fairly certain *had already read the paper* and "assessed whether the new method might on balance be useful." Less deserving than they, in Hartree's eyes, were those who he suspected (from the form of address they'd used) knew of the paper only from its title-listing in CC.⁵

Hartree calls this "rough justice," and it may at first seem puzzling, but it should not, for the reprint request is merely a convenient formula for a more important message. That message is something like this: "Esteemed colleague, I am competently interested in your work, and feel it to be to your advantage to know that. If somehow they have escaped you, I am sending you a few reprints of my own articles on related work. Undoubtedly you will want (read *need*) to cite them." As I have pointed out before,⁶ the reprint is far more than a technique of information transfer. It is a legal tender in the market of reputation.

I don't know what Hartree has done with that "torrent" of request cards, but I suggest he not let them simply go down the drain. Has it occurred to him what a terrific mail-

ing list they would make for some publisher selling books on the subject. Before throwing out your request cards, keep in mind that someday you may actually write that book you have in mind and your publisher will be more than grateful for all those leads—they can be difficult and costly to find, no matter how creative the book's advertisements or how high their pulling power. Who knows—maybe even Hartree will appreciate a CC listing by then. Or is there some other reason publishers keep sending us books to list?

1. Many years ago, ISI[®] had 15,000 fortune cookies made for promotion of our services at a FASEB meeting. They contained such brilliant tags as "Information is the enlightenment of facts." (Try being clever 15,000 times in a row!) We were literally left holding the bag when the exhibits committee decided our fortune cookies were a give-away forbidden by convention rules.
2. Garfield, E. Citation and distinction. [A letter to the editor of] *Nature* 242:485, 13 April 73.
3. Hartree, E.F. Reprint distribution. [A letter to the editor of] *Nature* 242:485, 13 April 73.
4. Cole, S. & Cole, J.R. Scientific output and recognition: a study in the operation of the reward system in science. *Amer. Sociol. Review* 32(3):377-90, 1967.
5. A recent report analyzing postal dates and address formats used by reprint requesters has confirmed the "pulling power" of *Current Contents*. See: Briggs, M.H. & Briggs, M. Hormones and blood chemistry. *Nature* 240:490-1, 22 December 72. The Briggses found that *Current Contents* was responsible for most of 203 requests for reprints of two articles. Their use of the title "Hormones and blood chemistry" for their reprint-request analysis was deliberately misleading, "in the hope of gathering more information."
6. Garfield, E. Reprint exchange. I. The multi-million dollar problem *ordinaire*. *Current Contents* No. 36, 6 Sept. 72, p. 5-6.