

Errors-Theirs, Ours and Yours

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One author recently wrote us about an article he published. On the contents page, the word "touch" had been dropped from the phrase "light touch".¹ As a result he received a cascade of reprint requests from people interested in vision research. Hopefully, my calling it to your attention will cause him to receive requests from those persons interested in his topic. However, we were happy to point out that the unfortunate error on the contents page was not carried over into the *Weekly Subject Index* or the *Science Citation Index*®.

Clearly ISI must make errors of its own. Error tolerance is an economic question. I insist that we cover no less than 100% of every issue of every journal we process. There can be no excuse for missing an issue. It almost would be better not to cover the journal at all. On the other hand, if an average journal publishes 300 articles each year, would you tolerate a .33% omission rate? Some readers might allow us to miss perhaps one article out of the 300, but we aim at a lower error rate than that. I know of no simple method of determining our error rate. Even writing to each of the 5,000 journal editors involved is not enough. A significant aspect of the problem is precise definition of items to be indexed. For journals that contain nothing but original research articles in a standard format, there is no real problem. But how many journals can you name that never contain editorials, book reviews, meeting notices, announcements, obituaries, letters, and other more ephemeral matter. A "letter to the editor" can mean virtually anything. A "letter to the editor" of *Nature* or *Science* is very

different from a letter to the editor of some horticultural or semi-popular journal-magazine.

Errors of commission and omission in author addresses are quite serious. We process more than a million address entries every year. Thousands of journals still refuse to give a complete address. (Incidentally have you ever written to a journal about this problem?) While we can and will try to complete an address, even supplying a Zip code when possible, there are many cases in which it is impossible to do so. Some universities have departments scattered throughout a city or state. Each may have different postal codes.

It is generally agreed that it's best not to talk too much in public about one's shortcomings, inadequacies, failings, etc. Most publications as well as institutions, do best, as Napoleon recommended "to wash their dirty linen at home." However, I think ISI® enjoys a special relationship with the mature readers of *CC*®. We know our accomplishments--and can admit our failings. We can't be all things to all people. So, it is important that you know *how* we may err and how far your confidence in *CC* and ISI is justified--as far as your individual requirements are concerned. But, at the same time, we must expect you to regard *CC* as part of a larger information system to which most of you have access.

Increasingly economic pressures, as well as the fragmentation of research into multidisciplinary pockets or clusters, makes it necessary for us to exclude certain journals from one or more editions of *CC*. Each time

we make such a decision some reader may be offended or affected. That person regards this as a serious "error" of omission.

The universally satisfactory alternative would be to cover all journals in a single monstrous CC. It would appear *daily*. I wanted to test that concept years ago and I proposed to the National Science Foundation the need for a *Daily Newspaper of Science*. More about that some other time.

There are other errors we can't control without inordinate cost. Suppose that a word in an article's title is misspelled on the contents page, but not within the journal. We do considerable "editing" of the contents page to eliminate wasted space, unnecessary features, etc. However, we do not compare, letter by letter, contents-page titles with those appearing at the head of each article. In a separate operation, we key every title-word, author's name and address, etc., for the ISI data bank. In this step we key directly from the title and text of the article. Thus even though a word is misspelled on the contents page, the correct spelling would enter the data bank and the *Weekly Subject Index*.

While many addresses are technically correct they are not uniform. When we recently finished the latest annual edition of *ISI's Who is Publishing in Science*® (WIPIS) we had to correct 75,000 entries after computer sorting. Otherwise there would have been two really duplicate entries for Prof. R.E. Jones at Columbia University, Physics Dept., 118 St. & Broadway, New York City, 10027, and Prof. R.E. Jones, University of Columbia, Dept. of Physics, New York, N.Y. The problem is further complicated by the possibility that two people with the same last name and initials may be at the same university. How many T. Yamakawa's are there at Tokyo University?

It a serious error occurs in the listing of your address in CC or WIPIS, please write to us. A correction will be published and used in our cumulative indexes.

Many grammatical and spelling errors occur in translated contents pages published by non-English journals. I'm sure that if we at ISI had to translate from English into Russian, Japanese, German, French, etc., we'd make similar errors just as often. Nevertheless it does not improve the reader's image of ISI to find such errors if we are blamed for them. When a Soviet journal--for example the *Doklady*--is covered in the original in CC, we reproduce the English contents page that appears in the journal. It must be very challenging to the translation staff of the Soviet Academy of Sciences to handle the terminology of so many disciplines. One admires their versatility.

However, other Soviet journals do a less creditable job, but still with better skill than that shown by some other non-English journals published in the West. We can only hope that the author is consulted in most cases regarding the technical terminology. Yet, it is hard for us to criticize the quality of title translation when there are so many journals that still adamantly refuse to translate at all. As part of our drive to improve international standards we recently wrote the scientific attachés of several countries asking their help on this problem. We hope they can also help in getting journals in their respective countries to give complete addresses, including postal codes.

Finally, however, since so many of our readers are also authors, I appeal for their help as well. Make sure that the editors of your favorite journals provide complete and accurate data so that your colleagues, in other fields, will be able to locate you when your article is listed in CC.

1 Sekuler, R. *et al.* Sensitive, objective procedure for evaluating response to light touch. *Neurology* 23(12):1282-91, 1973.