

The Purpose of the ISI Press Digest  
or  
"Life is Short and  
Information Endless"

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Although *Current Contents*<sup>®</sup> presently carries no "letters to the editor" section, I found the following letter particularly succinct and worthy of an editorial reply:

*Dear Dr. Garfield:*

*I read ISI<sup>®</sup> Press Digest of Current Contents for about the same reasons I read 'Dear Abbey.' What is the purpose of the ISI Press Digest? Is it simply to amuse the readers of an otherwise dull listing of journal contents?*

*Sincerely,*

*Dora R. Passino, Ph.D.  
Ann Arbor, Michigan<sup>1</sup>*

To answer Dr. Passino's last question first: yes, part of the purpose of the *ISI Press Digest* is to amuse readers. I don't mean inane, purposeless amusement, but rather the kind of amusement that informs, instructs, educates, broadens one's perspectives, opens one to new possibilities and relationships, casts previous knowledge in a new light, and establishes new patterns of thought.

When we have amused readers, we have at least partially succeeded. But the purpose of the *Press Digest* is not *simply* to amuse readers.

The *Press Digest* presents specialized information in a form which is comprehensible--sometimes even

enjoyable--to non-specialists. Its purpose is to connect; to link; to cross-pollinate between specialties. Thus, it presents an item on the legal implications of sex predetermination; an article on biomedical engineering; a sociological analysis of music or literature; a series of conflicting reports on the effects of marijuana; a feminist perspective on architecture; an historian's view of a scientific discovery; or a science-fictional treatment of new developments in the real world of science.

The *Press Digest* presents the popular media's coverage of science as well as scientific research on the popular media. It covers the impact of science on the arts and humanities as well as the views of artists and humanists on science. It promotes the public's understanding of science as well as science's understanding of the public.<sup>2</sup>

Many scientists have pointed to a relative decline in the power, prestige--and funding--of science in recent years. A large segment of the public blames science and scientists for many of society's maladies--pollution, overpopulation, scarcity of resources, and even increased government surveillance.

In this atmosphere, it becomes imperative that scientists maintain an awareness not only of new de-

velopments in their own fields, but also of the reporting of these developments in the press. Besides alerting them to useful findings, methods and insights, the *Press Digest* alerts scientists to oversimplifications, erroneous reports, and sloppy journalism. It calls attention to bad, careless, misleading, and irresponsible reporting about science--as well as to good reporting. Only a scientist who is aware of errors can take steps to correct or prevent them from occurring again.

In this discussion of what the *Press Digest* is, it may be useful to define what it is *not*.

The *Press Digest* is *not* a daily newspaper of science--although sometime in the future it may become an integral part of just such a newspaper.<sup>3</sup> It does *not* routinely announce grants, promotions, dedications of institutions, or Congressional hearings--the day-to-day politics of science--although it may announce an especially significant grant, a finding of discrimination in hiring and promotion, the opening of a new research center, or the passage of new laws which have a direct effect on scientists.

The selection of items in the *Press Digest* is *not* systematic, methodical, or comprehensive. The final selection is more subjective than objective, more intuitive than rational--although the piles of material from which the 40 or so weekly items are chosen are accumulated quite rationally. The items are selected by myself, by Robert L. Hayne, ISI's Chief Editor, and by Steve Aaronson, ISI's *Press Digest* Editor. Each week the three of us--with the help of ISI's various information services--scan about 10,000 journal articles, editorials, reviews, letters, and news items. The total is high because we scan all editions of *Current Contents*, we use ISI's ASCA® (Automatic Subject Citation Alert) service to scan 3,700 jour-

nals for certain key terms, and we scan every issue of more than 100 popular magazines and newspapers. In addition, we receive items from ISI's staff, from ISI's European offices, and from CC® readers themselves.

Naturally, we end up with more items than can possibly be digested in 8 pages per week--although in recent months we have raised the average number of *Press Digest* items from about 30 to 40 per week. This surplus of items has already given rise to the "Undigested But Not Indigestible" section, which is an abbreviated version of the *Press Digest*. Several new features are also planned.

In fact, we are now preparing to survey a random sample of the readers of *Current Contents*. We would like to find out what your reading habits and preferences are--which types of *Press Digest* items you find most useful, whether you read the *Press Digest* sequentially or simply scan, how often you are interested enough in a *Press Digest* item to read the original. We'll also be trying to determine how readers feel about several contemplated new features: a *World Newspaper Digest*, similar to the *Press Digest* but covering only science-related newspaper articles from all over the world; *Book Reviews* comprised mainly of excerpts from books of general interest to scientists; *Review of Reviews*, a feature which would digest several reviews of the same book; *Highly Cited Authors*, brief essays in which the authors of highly cited papers comment on their papers' significance; perhaps digests of the lead articles from each issue of such journals as *Science* and *Nature*; and a *Letters to the Editor* section.

Also, starting in 1976 all *Press Digest* titles will be included in the *Weekly Subject Index*.

One inescapable fact about the *ISI Press Digest*--which may be its most obvious weakness and simultaneously its major strength--is that each *Press Digest* item is not the whole article but merely a part, a bit, a taste. It is something that the author never intended to stand alone--the conclusion of a complex argument; the results without a description of the experiment; an

assertion deprived of its supporting evidence. It stands in a contextual vacuum.

Like identifying a prehistoric creature from a single tooth, reconstructing the original article from a *Press Digest* item is a tricky business. Sometimes it results in gross misconceptions. Nevertheless some readers attempt it, and they unfortunately and unfairly attribute the resulting distortion to ISI.

Readers should remember that the purpose of the *Press Digest* is to alert them to items of interest and to stimulate their curiosity. When it has been sufficiently stimulated, I urge you to read the original--whether you find it in a local library (for which purpose each *Press Digest* item includes a complete citation) or you choose to take advantage of ISI's OATS® service.

The *Press Digest's* virtue is brevity. Only by making each item brief and concise can we induce busy scientists to maintain their awareness of science in the press. But brevity has its dangers, as Aldous Huxley recognized and beautifully stated in the passage below--years before the advent of the *ISI Press Digest*:

"...However elegant and memorable, brevity can never, in the nature of things, do justice to all the

facts of a complex situation, On such a theme one can be brief only by omission and simplification. Omission and simplification help us to understand--but help us, in many cases, to understand the wrong thing; for our comprehension may be only of the abbreviator's neatly formulated notions, not of the vast, ramifying reality from which these notions have been so arbitrarily abstracted.

"But life is short and information endless: nobody has time for everything. In practice we are generally forced to choose between an unduly brief exposition and no exposition at all. Abbreviation is a necessary evil and the abbreviator's business is to make the best of a job which, though intrinsically bad, is still better than nothing. He must learn to simplify, but not to the point of falsification. He must learn to concentrate upon the essentials of a situation, but without ignoring too many of reality's qualifying side issues. In this way he may be able to tell, not indeed the whole truth (for the whole truth about almost any important subject is incompatible with brevity), but considerably more than the dangerous quarter-truths and half-truths which have always been the current coin of thought."<sup>4</sup>

1. Passino D R. Personal communication, 10 February 1975.
2. Garfield E. *ISI's Press Digest* helps narrow the gap between the scientist and the layman. *Current Contents* No. 20, 15 May 1973, p. 5-6.
3. Garfield E. Ever think of *Current Contents* as a newspaper? *Current Contents*-No. 40, 6 October 1975, p. 5-6.
4. Huxley A. *Brave new world revisited*. New York: Harper & Row, 1958, p. vii-viii.