

Humor in Scientific Journals
and
Journals of Scientific Humor

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Science is by nature a serious business, and scientists are supposed to be thoughtful, earnest, sober--*serious*--people. Maybe that's why most scientists wear such *dull* neckties. Like any serious work, science includes a good amount of drudgery and tedium. *Current Contents*[®] (CC[®]) readers know that well enough. You have to read an incredible number of boring titles to find the few that will interest or excite *you*. Fortunately, there are usually a few titles in each issue of CC that, aside from any inherent interest, are just plain funny. In the last few years, we've added the *ISI Press Digest* and cartoons in most issues to help lighten the burden of systematic scanning.

Many lay people may find it hard to believe, but the sober scientist *can* smile. Some scientists even laugh aloud. I know a mathematician who dissolves in hysterical laughter whenever a colleague screws up his equations during a lecture. It's not his colleague's embarrassment, but the situation, that he finds funny.

There's a lot to laugh about in science, and a lot that can be made fun of. Much of the humor in scientific literature is deliberately covert, and may be highly subtle. Quite frequently, hoaxes, spoofs, and satires appear in the guise of serious articles in what are normally quite staid and respectable journals. A

couple of years ago, *Science* published one of the funniest articles of this type I've ever read. It was a lead article describing an ecologic model of scientific information, presented in hilarious dead-seriousness.¹ Quite recently I was uniquely honored in a letter to the editor of *Nature* from a less than serious author poking fun at citation analysis.²

It would be a pleasing luxury if I had the time to cover the subject here comprehensively, but it would take a book. Instead, I discuss below four of a small group of scientific journals that are devoted exclusively to scientific humor.

The oldest surviving member of this group is the *Journal of Irreproducible Results*. Launched in 1956 as a mimeographed sheet containing just one article, it now has a worldwide circulation of over 15,000 and is published quarterly by the Society for Basic Irreproducible Research. According to its editor, Alexander Kohn of the Israel Institute for Biological Research, the journal is now deluged with so many satirical contributions that it must cope with a considerable publication backlog.

A typical article in the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* takes as its starting point the commonly used expression "butterflies in the stomach." In "The gastronomic butterfly syndrome,"³ the authors go through the motions of scientifically diagnosing the so-called

syndrome. X-rays show "several barium-filled butterflies." They report, "Definitive diagnosis was made in this case by the development and use of a new instrument which will certainly take its place in the clinician's diagnostic and therapeutic armamentarium. It is the gastroscopic butterfly net."

Besides its contribution to laughter, the journal "has contributed not a little in the predictive field." For example, it has described explosives that can float in the air. It announced the discovery of thiotimoline, a substance that dissolves just before water is added to it; of a new contraceptive NO-acetol ("a compound active because it has NO in every position"); of the antibiotic bobamycin. It was the first to describe the "umbilical complex" of ballistic missiles which led to launching failures; and first proposed how to obtain noble gas (xenon) compounds--which was subsequently accomplished by 18 real scientists who announced their discovery in *Science*.⁴

Let readers get the idea that humorous scientific journals are concerned only with fun and games, it is worth noting that the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* has contributed at least one new scientific law. Other fundamental laws of human behavior of this type include: Maier's Law ("If facts do not conform to theory, they must be disposed of."); Murphy's Law ("If anything can go wrong with an experiment, it will."); Hersh's Law ("Biochemistry expands so as to fill the space and time available for its completion and publication."); and Old and Kohn's Law ("The efficiency of a committee meeting is inversely proportional to the number of participants and the time spent on deliberations."). The new law, first announced in 1961, is this: "If a research project is not worth doing at all, it is not worth doing well."⁵ Its veracity is readily apparent

to all working scientists.

Additional scientific "laws" were proposed in a 1974 *JIR* article by W. Van de Stadt et al. Applying Finagle's factor, the Fudge factor, and the Diddle factor to Murphy's Law, the authors deduced these corollary laws: "No matter what result is anticipated, there is always someone willing to fake it or misinterpret it," and, "In any collection of data the figure that is most obviously correct, is the mistake. The most likely person to see it first, is your worst enemy."⁶

The authors also present Muench's postulates and laws. Muench's three postulates are: "Everyone talks too much;" "Everyone writes too much;" and "Nobody pays any attention." On the basis of these postulates, the authors assert that, "The length of a research report is inversely proportional to how well the investigators know what they are doing."

A most amusing section of the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* is "Authors and Subjects," a listing of authentic articles from other (serious) journals in which the author's name fits the subject so well that it often seems contrived. For example: "The dreaded piranha" by N. Guppy; "The life and habits of wild animals" by J. Wolf; "Hominid and cultural origins" by A. Mann; "Natural history of birds" by L.W. Wing; "The action of nicotine and the pleasure of smoking" by J.H. Burns; "The behavior of wolves, dogs, and related canids" by M. Fox; and "Varieties of juvenile delinquency" by C. Frankenstein. Like the lowest form of humor, the pun, this type of humor is a bit juvenile--but it helps to relieve the tedium of serious work.

Another section of the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* called "Quotes" demonstrates that humor can be found almost anywhere--even in *Current*

Contents. On October 31, 1973, CC's Journal Coverage Changes listed "*Bulletin of Suicidology* (ceased publication)." JIR picked it up.

Even a rhyme with the title of a popular theory can be the starting point for a humorous article. John C. Holden twists the geological concepts of plate tectonics and continental drift into "Fake tectonics and continental drip." Fake is the acronym for "Final Answers for the Knowledge of Earth tectonics." The author estimates that the universal landmass of Pangaea, which broke up some 200 million years ago, will re-unite "on Tuesday morning at 9:00 a.m., 1,786,379 A.D. The resulting new universal landmass (excluding Antarctica) is called 'Pangooy' and the event is termed 'continental splash'; the final coalescence of continental drips."

Somewhat more specialized than the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* is *The Subterranean Sociology Newsletter*, published "at least twice per year at strange intervals" by--who else?--the Subterranean Sociological Association. Actually, the association is the creation and domain of Marcello Truzzi of Eastern Michigan University. Truzzi claims that the Association "may someday be a profit-making organization and was designed to promote Truth, Beauty, Justice and a good time for all." He began the newsletter ten years ago by writing the whole thing himself and sending it out free. Two years ago the *Newsletter* changed from a "freebie" with a circulation of 600--mostly "odd people"--to a publication for the 150 members of the Subterranean Sociological Association, plus 60 libraries.

The purpose of the newsletter was originally bibliographic. "The point was to demonstrate that you can do sociology on *anything*--from factories to circuses." In addition, calling attention to

unusual research projects "made the people doing this work feel legitimate." The *Newsletter* still carries bibliographies arranged by subject. For example, a recent "mini-bibliography" on beggars listed 15 scholarly studies on begging, vagrancy and panhandling, including "Personality problems of beggars," "Types of begging," and "Five generations of a begging family."⁸

Other *Newsletter* features include a "Socio-Crostic" crossword puzzle, interesting and funny quotations from scientific and literary sources scattered throughout, and a "Gripe Department" written by Truzzi. The regular articles range from parodies of socio-jargon to serious critiques of shortcomings in sociological theory and methods.

In recent months, submissions of material to the *Newsletter* have hit a "dry period." Truzzi comments in his "Editorial Rantings": "It may well be that the paucity of recent irreverence is somewhat related to the tightening marketplace for our sociological wares, for many of us may (a) feel life in general is not lately conducive to good humor, and (b) think that criticism of our discipline is currently 'no laughing matter' since we need all the support we can get as we vie for students and money. In addition, I note that the *ASA Footnotes* has taken to occasionally publishing humorous pieces that might once have come to *TSSN*."⁹

The *Worm Runner's Digest* is perhaps the most varied and unpredictable of the humor journals discussed here. Frequent use of illustrations, cartoons, personal narratives, short stories, phoney advertisements, poems, jokes, limericks, and songs all help to keep the reader amused.

Worm Runner's Digest is the siamese twin of another journal, the much more serious *Journal of Biological Psychology*.

According to the editor and founder of these twin journals, James V. McConnell (the author of numerous papers on planarian worms and biochemistry of learning), the *Digest* "started as my own personal little joke on the Scientific Establishment but has turned out to be more of a joke on me. I've lost grants because of the *Digest*, had my laboratory experiments questioned not because of their content but because of the *Digest*, had articles I submitted to other journals turned down because I dared to cite studies published in the *Digest*." ¹⁰

McConnell started the *Worm Runner's Digest* in 1959 in response to letters from high school students who had heard about his experiments with planaria and wanted to know about the care and training of worms. This first manual was 14 pages long, and as a joke it was dubbed Volume 1, No. 1, "the joke being that we had no intention of continuing its publication," says McConnell. "Little did we appreciate the strength of the publish-or-perish syndrome. Academic scientists are so desperate that they will publish *anywhere* (for the Dean really doesn't know the difference), so to our utter amazement, we began getting contributions for the next issue." At first, the poems, jokes and satires were scattered randomly among more serious articles. But many readers found it difficult to tell which articles were supposed to be humorous and which were not. So the humorous material was gathered at the back of the journal and was printed upside down "to make sure that no one would confuse the fact with the fancy."

After several years, another problem arose. Authors of the serious material complained that their articles were not being covered by abstracting services, which "would not touch anything that came from a journal with such an odd

name as ours." Finally, the name of the front half of the *Digest* was changed to *The Journal of Biological Psychology*. As McConnell says, "Within two months we received letters from *Psychological Abstracts*, *Biological Abstracts* and *Chemical Abstracts* asking that we send them this 'new' journal for abstracting."

In recent months, submissions of material to *The Worm Runner's Digest* have increased, while submissions to the *Journal of Biological Psychology* have decreased. McConnell attributes this to "an increase in alcohol consumption among scientists, or a decrease in research grants." To encourage more *Journal* articles, a \$25 prize for the best serious article in each issue is now given. Authors also receive 100 free reprints. Contributors to the *Digest* are paid \$10 per article. However, McConnell rejects many manuscripts that demand too much knowledge on the part of readers or that are too specialized or idiosyncratic. Most *Digest* articles satirize biology and psychology, with occasional references to education.

For example, some of the contributions in the *Digest* deal with *dead* animal psychology. These articles have titles such as "Learned laziness in dead pigeons," "Taste aversion in dead rats: learning or motivational deficit?" and a reply to the latter, "Taste aversion in dead rats: a note on proper control procedures." Some *Digest* articles are aimed directly at worm runners themselves, such as "The narcissistic worm," "The worm ranch and other failures," and "Worm world of sports." And many articles in the *Worm Runner's Digest* are merely silly in general, such as "How important is importance?," "An interview with Dr. Behaviorism," "Unconscious scientific conflicts," "Inventors are fulla bulla," and "The slippery

affair of Dr. Gummy."

One of the *Digest's* unique features is its humorous-journal-within-a-humorous-journal: *The Journal of American Statisticulation*, described as "the official journal of the *I Collecta Data Statisticulation Honor Society*." It contains articles, footnotes, classified advertisements ("Timid hermit crab wants to come out of his shell. Seeks understanding mate." "Refined, experienced paramecium seeks cultured dish." "Nine inch tapeworm looking for friendly alimentary canal. No freaks."), cartoons (abnormal curves speaking to one another), a contest ("Can You Draw This Curve?") and even a Statisticulimerick:

Statistics profs over the nation,
have reached new levels of elation;
When it has been hinted,
their work would be printed;

In the *Journal of American Statisticulation*.¹¹

Last year the *Journal of American Statisticulation* parodied its parent journal--the *Worm Runner's Digest*. This parody-of-a-parody was entitled, "The Worm Runner's Digress."¹² Another issue contained "A demographic study of humorous articles published in a leading scientific journal (or: does the *Worm Runner's Digest* have a southern exposure?)"¹³ Somehow, this kind of parody-of-a-parody-within-a-parody seems slightly incestuous.

Actually, the *Journal of American Statisticulation* started out in October of 1973 as an autonomous journal with the enormous circulation of 35. In January 1975 it became a regular part of the *Worm Runner's Digest*. The *Journal's* editor, Francis S. Kalinowski II, claims "full responsibility for the inane, ridiculous and obfuscatory material contained in the *JAS*." Kalinowski defines "statisticulation" as "the art of lying with statistics while maintaining an ap-

pearance of objectivity and rationality." From the beginning, he says, the intent of the *JAS* "was to print anything that was outlandish and ridiculous, and to leave serious matters to serious journals."

It is undoubtedly significant--though I can't say exactly *how*--that much of scientists' humor deals with sex and scatology. Although some examples of this humor are characterized by an adolescent preoccupation with taboo-breaking--such as sneaking vulgar words into an article by means of creative use of names, initials, and acronyms--some is genuinely witty.

For example, in *The Journal of Irreproducible Results: Selected Papers*,¹⁴ a book of collected articles from the *Journal*, a whole section is devoted to "irreproducible forays into the intriguing mystery of SEX." One paper, "Unusual positions for coupling reactions between activated species" by P. Ping Tom, discusses the mechanics of human sexual intercourse by analogy with the bonding of chemical molecules. Another article, "Preliminary observations upon an isobaric spin model for human sexuality," purports to investigate human sexuality using the methods and terminology of nuclear physics: "It is generally conceded that the male gets a larger charge out of sex than the female (although this finding has recently been challenged by Huang, Bang and Sigh, who claim that the greater excitation of the female is masked by lack of a monopole emission mechanism...)."

Other *Journal* articles with a predominantly sexual theme include "The wife of Bath sign: an aid in the diagnosis of gonococcal arthritis and its predisposing cause," "Obliteration of sex," and "Sexual feats and facts." This last contribution discusses the advent of "sexual athletics" complete with tour-

naments, training, coaches, and teams, and medical specialists to provide aid to the injured.

Some of the most intriguing titles are real ones. For instance, the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* has listed citations for: "Paroxysmal sneezing following orgasm," "Diets high in glucose or sucrose and young women" (sugar-coated young women are best), "Canine genital moniliasis as a source of reinfection in the human female," and "Symposium on the mechanics of contact between deformable bodies" (attendance by invitation only).

The *Worm Runner's Digest* has carried articles entitled "The Psychology of having an organism," "The negative relationship between IQ and penis size," "Sex transplants in worms," "Ejaculations and indulgences: an efficiency study," "The relative incidence of sexual proclivity and erotic response among students of graduate level statistics courses," "Confessions of a cunning linguist," "A cumulative hypothesis for penile erection-related brain damage," "Electronic sex and other exacerbations," and "The sex life of the neuron."

The *Journal of Insignificant Research*, which describes itself as "an occasional journal, published intermittently by the University of Chicago and the Vanishing Press," has a section which lists funny-sounding article titles--especially when the humor is related to sex. For example, a recent issue listed the following *real* titles: "What use is sex?" (from *Journal of Theoretical Biology*), "Necking behavior in the giraffe" (from *Journal of Zoology*), and "Effect of concealing 'it' on sex role preferences of preschool children" (from *Perceptual Motor Skills*).

Another section of the *Journal of Insignificant Research*, called "The Little

Red Book," lists brief quotations from the scientific literature which are notable for (1) the use of arcane and indecipherable jargon, (2) the use of the words "tit," "ass" and "pot", (3) stating the obvious in as tangled a manner as possible, (4) typographical errors which change the meaning, and (5) almost anything else which, when taken out of context, may appear screamingly funny.

The *Journal* also contains humorous drawings and charts, poems, "Blurbology" (phrases taken out of context), satirical articles, photos with amusing captions, and scattered editorial comments such as, "Your Editor carefully selects the trees to be pulped for each issue of this journal," and "The crazies who edit this Journal--whose cover from 1960 to 1967 bore the legend: "One of 93 copies printed on 100% Kleenex"--are Leigh Van Valen and Isidore Nabi of the University of Chicago.

If some readers are disgusted and repelled by the sexual jesting common to these journals, they will surely be outraged at the scatological references with abound in humorous journals. For example, the *Worm Runner's Digest* has carried an article entitled "The travails of Schoenfahrt" and another entitled "Empirical evidence for a new state of human development: the nasal stage" (including discussion and illustrations of nose-picking).

The abstract of one article in the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* is neatly alliterative: "Ubiquitous ungulate uberty utterly unexploited." In the article, the author advocates two methods of "ungulate gas harvesting." In the first, this is accomplished by herding all the world's ungulates under one roof (in Texas) in order to promote "enteric fer-

mentation." Methane could then be extracted easily. In the second method, to be used by emerging nations, "Every man would have not only his acre and his cow, but his cow would also be installed with a permanent gas extractor." The author concludes, "Obviously the long-term solution must be sought in the provision by genetic engineering of a built-in methane trap." 15

Scatology in scientific humor journals undoubtedly reached its peak with the publication of M. Kaye's "Preparation of pure crap" in the *Journal of Insignificant Research*. 16 The article begins, "It has been estimated that about 90% of the scientific complement of almost all scientific institutions is engaged in the processing of crap...." The author goes on to discuss the abundance of crap, edible forms of crap, metallic crap, and the steps involved in the purification of crap. Of course, its all a bunch of crap.

Humor in science, as in the rest of life, helps to change our perspective. Humor forces us to detach ourselves from ordinary modes of thinking in order to appreciate the incongruities and absurdities of a situation. When sci-

entists detach themselves--even momentarily--from their research, they can identify and examine the folly, pomposity, ignorance and indignities of their peculiar situation. The detachment caused by humor can be a source of insight and understanding--as well as a good laugh.

On the following page is a listing of subscription information on the four journals discussed here. There are undoubtedly other scientific humor journals which I have neglected to mention. I would be interested to hear from readers who know of such publications.

Humorous items culled from these four journals as well as the so-called "serious" scientific press are included in this week's *ISI Press Digest*. We hope that some of them tickle your funny-bone.

Let me close by repeating a story that I heard Lenny Bruce tell in Baltimore about 1952. It has become very popular in Eastern Europe these days to use this story to poke fun at the local police.

Do you know why FBI men always go around in groups of three? One can read, one can write, and the third watches the intellectuals!

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Humorous Scientific Journals: Subscription Information

The Journal of Irreproducible Results
Alexander Kohn, editor
Society for Basic Irreproducible Research
P. O. Box 234
Chicago Heights, Illinois 60411
4/yr, \$3.50 domestic; \$4.25 foreign.

The Worm Runner's Digest
The Journal of Biological Psychology
James V. McConnell, editor
Planarian Research Group
Mental Health Research Institute
University of Michigan
P. O. Box 644
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48107
2/yr, \$5.00

Subterranean Sociology Newsletter
Marcello Truzzi, editor
Department of Sociology
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197
2/yr, \$3.00 (controlled).*

*Published "at least twice per year at strange intervals. It is available to members of the Subterranean Sociological Association and by Institutional subscription. Membership in the SSA is available to all at \$3.00 per year and at the special discount price of \$2.95 to non-members of the American Sociological Association. Foreign and library subscriptions are \$3.00 per year also.

The Journal of Insignificant Research
Leigh Van Valen & Isidore Nabi, Editors
Committee on Evolutionary Biology
University of Chicago
1103 East 57th Street
Chicago, Illinois 60615
2/yr, \$2.00 (controlled?)*

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