

CURRENT COMMENTS

False Publication Dates and Other Rip-Offs

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It is remarkable how scientists and librarians tolerate publishing practices by scholarly journals which they would find intolerable or unacceptable in "popular" magazines. If you entered a subscription to the *New Yorker*, the *New Scientist* or any other magazine and discovered you would not receive your January issue until June, you would be outraged—and rightly so. Yet the scholarly community docilely accepts this treatment from many journal publishers. Numerous journals of sufficiently high scientific or scholarly value to be listed in *Current Contents*[®] are issued late as a matter of course.

Some of the culprits are not the least bit coy or shy about continuing this practice. Scan any issue of *CC*[®] and you will find examples. They are easy to recognize. Look for the qualifying statement: "This is the latest issue of this journal. The cover date does not correspond to the actual date of publication."

We don't add this blurb to every late issue. Hundreds of journals appear one or two numbers late. And occasionally journals are lost in the mail or unavoidably delayed despite the best efforts of the publisher. We reserve our qualifying statement for only those journals that consistently arrive three or more months after the "publication date" listed on their covers.

I've mentioned the problems associated with false publication dates before.¹⁻² They are especially frustrating to us at ISI[®] because our reputation is based in part on timeliness. Journals that appear with misleading publication dates make it seem that *CC* is not current. In fact, most time lags you may notice are caused by the journals themselves. You can judge our almost obsessive concern for timeliness by observing our treatment of weekly journals with regular and timely schedules. We have an elaborate priority system,

based on frequency and *known* importance, that assures prompt coverage of the most significant and timely material.

Our indexes, too, suffer when journals bear false publication dates. It is our policy to index all issues that actually arrive at ISI during the period on the index's cover. The *Science Citation Index*[®] (*SCI*[®]) quarterly for January to March 1977, for example, contains information on the journal issues that came into our offices during those months. Due to the vagaries of mail strikes, etc., you would expect a small percentage of the items in the index to bear 1976 publication dates. Unfortunately, a disproportionate number do so. The abundance of 1976 dates makes it seem as though our indexing is lagging behind when, in fact, it is not. Rather, it is the late journals that make it impossible to produce a perfectly complete calendar-year index.

But we are certainly not the only victims of these publishing practices. Subscribers are often led to believe by the time lapses that their copies were lost in the mail. They then begin a usually futile but time-consuming correspondence with the publishers or innocent subscription agents. Librarians and agents spend inordinate amounts of time claiming "missing" issues which in reality have never been published.

Intentionally or not, some publishers are devious about publica-

tion dates. They incompletely identify journal issues by putting nothing more specific than the volume, issue number, and year on the cover. This practice gives the impression of currency except in obvious cases, such as a monthly. If issue No.12 arrives in June, then something is obviously wrong.

Consider a horrible example we covered in *CC/Life Sciences* No. 8 (20 February 1978). This particular issue had "Vol. 10, No. 5, 1977" on its cover. If the journal is a monthly, then No. 5 is the May 1977 issue—nine months late. Or perhaps the journal is a bimonthly. Then No. 5 would be the September-October 1977 issue. Even if by chance it was the last issue for 1977, the journal arrived late because it was received in February, 1978.

Another deplorable practice followed by some publishers is their refusal to correlate a volume number with a calendar year. A volume should consist of journal issues published during a specified calendar year only. It should not begin in July and end the following June. Scholars and librarians should always be able to correlate a particular volume number with a single year.

The volume-year correspondence is a century-old tradition that should not be mindlessly ignored or changed at will. It provides the added degree of redundancy which reduces the possibility of errors and

mitigates the effects of an error should one occur in writing a citation.³

Volume numbers were created to simplify the librarian's task in binding journals in "volumes" of manageable size. Without them libraries would never know when to bind a group of journal issues. In my experience the lack of volume numbers invariably results in oversized, unmanageable volumes such as those of the journals published by the Chemical Society (London) and other publishers who refuse to use a volume number. Why the publisher of *Tetrahedron Letters* follows this practice for that journal and not for its many other excellent journals is a policy I'll never understand.

However, non-correspondence of volume and year is most inexcusable in a new journal whose first issue is dated November or December. The publisher could easily have waited and started the journal and the volume in January.

I've urged journal publishers to correct these practices and I am gratified that some have made significant changes, especially in publication dates. However, most of the journals guilty of the practices I have mentioned would quickly find a way to publish on time if they were required to do so by law. It is remarkable what legislation can accomplish when voluntary action fails. Look, for ex-

ample, at the many journals which suddenly found it possible to place a unique bibliographic citation on the first page of each article when the new US Copyright Act took effect. For decades, most publishers ignored our pleas that each article's citation should be included on its first page. In that way one could cite a reprint without having to go to the original journal or an index for the necessary bibliographic information. But as soon as the new law permitted journal publishers to collect royalties for photocopies, dozens of publishers suddenly found it possible to include the citation so that payments could be made through the Copyright Clearance Center.⁴ *Science* took the lead when it announced earlier this year that it was signing up with the Center. I only wish that *Science* could now find a way to number its editorial page!

Is there an alternative to legislative restrictions on journals which refuse to meet minimum international standards? Perhaps the American Association for the Advancement of Science and other professional societies should establish watchdog committees similar to science courts. Maybe publishers of journals should get together through STM (International Scientific, Technical, and Medical Publishers Association) and support the appointment of ombudsmen to regulate journal

practices. Members could be rotated periodically and appointed by organizations of publishers, scholars, and librarians. Friendly persuasion can go a long way, but I feel that the clout represented by such a group could provide the regulation that is so desperately needed. The International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) could also play a constructive role, not unlike that of the International Standards Organization. But neither ICSU nor ISO has the influence that industry ombudsmen could exercise over recalcitrant journals.

Fortunately most of the journals we cover in the *SCI* or *CC* do adhere to high standards. But it is remarkable how many of the most significant journals of science, no less than the mediocre ones, refuse to modify archaic or idiosyncratic policies which work against the best interest of science. Many of these practices involve "trivialities" by any reasonable standard. But it is the accumulated burden of such trivialities which eventually leads to radical solutions unless wisdom prevails.

REFERENCES

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*Reprinted in **Garfield E.** *Essays of an information scientist.* Philadelphia, ISI Press, 1977, 2 vols.