

Current Comments

**"How Do You Do It?
Write All Those Essays, I Mean."**

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Recently I attended a conference in Amsterdam of the International Federation of Science Editors' Associations. During one of the coffee breaks I was asked, "How do you do it?" My colleague was referring to my weekly *Current Comments*[®] essay. Since I have been asked about this quite often I thought I might as well turn my response into an essay.

Since it is not unusual for people like Jack Anderson and William Buckley to write weekly, even daily, columns, I read into people's queries an implied question, "How do you manage to run a company like ISI[®] and get out all that verbiage?" But it is precisely because I am the head of an information company like ISI that I am able and need to exploit its resources for the purpose of conducting my particular brand of public relations. A significant percentage of my essays are, in one way or another, derived from ISI's data bases. For instance, my essay defining "*of Nobel class*"¹ would have been impossible without our citation data. And over the years I have published many essays on various citation-based themes. To some, these "citation studies" may seem like boilerplates—just change the data and crank them out. But while these essays follow a general form, the changing data change what we will emphasize and how we categorize authors, articles, or journals.

The term "we" is not the royal we. I am not alone in this weekly adventure. ISI has a large staff of information scientists, librarians, writers, editors, and other professionals. At one point or

another all of them help me to prepare these essays. And once an essay is in preliminary or final draft form I do not hesitate to ask any ISI employee to act as a referee.

However, my closest editorial colleague is Susan Deutsch, director of communications, who reports to Tom DiRenzo, vice president of direct marketing and communications. Sometimes Susan first hears from me about a topic, as in this case, by receiving a handwritten draft. Other times it will be a scribbled memo attached to a newspaper article, journal reprint, or some other communication.

Periodically, I meet with Susan's staff to discuss these drafts or memos in order to flesh out what needs to be done. Susan sets priorities for the projects with Linda Cooper, manager of bibliographic research, and Esther Surden, manager, editorial materials. They assign staff members to specific essays. These are the people whose names you've seen at the end of most essays. They do much of the research and groundwork necessary for each essay.

Often essays go through three or four drafts. I know from long experience that in the re-reading of a manuscript many ideas occur to me that did not surface on the first go-around. Sometimes I receive drafts when I am abroad so I must read my revisions rapidly over the phone into a tape recorder set up at the office. One time I called in an essay from Greece and then discovered the hotel had charged me the exorbitant rate of \$200 for the call. Now I usually

dial direct from abroad and take 10 seconds to tell my office where I am; they return the call after setting up the tape recorder. This phone call system, when necessary, works very well. However, once, inadvertently, we did not discuss the final title of my short essay introducing Derek Price's article, "The Citation Cycle."² I would have preferred a title like "Derek John de Solla Price—The Irascible but Lovable Citation Cyclist!"

Once the essays are in final form they are usually sent to referees. Sometimes these referees are in-house people who have expertise in the areas discussed. More often, they are outside experts who have been identified during the research for the essays. I wish I could send an advance proof to every *Current Contents*[®] (*CC*[®]) reader since some essays elicit letters with information I had omitted. However, most letters compliment the accuracy of the essays. I also get requests to reprint essays. For example, the essay on leprosy³ produced such requests from the American Leprosy Missions and the USPHS Hospital at Carville, Louisiana. This is flattering to me; it also reflects well on the high professionalism of my staff and on the outside referees who gave their time and knowledge freely.

Once an essay is approved, it goes to Bonnie Cohen, manager of production, communications department, who is also our *Citation Classics* editor. She heads the copy editing and proofreading group that assures the grammatical and typographical accuracy of the essays, the *Classics*, and *Press Digest*. Bonnie also approves the artist's final layout of the essay, not an easy task when there are several figures or tables to fit into appropriate places. Many years ago I used to read each essay in final typeset form. I haven't done that recently, except in rare cases when the layout is especially tricky. And I usually read the essays and *Press Digest* once they are published. I continue to read and often edit *Citation Classics* before they are published. I find this an extremely re-

warding activity and will say more about that soon.

This description may suggest that one essay follows another in a conveyor belt fashion. Actually, there may be several dozen essays in one stage or another at any one time. And that brings up another question I am often asked: "How do you keep coming up with essay topics?" That is like asking a scientist how he keeps coming up with experiments to perform. The truth is that given the opportunity and enough support I would probably write two or three essays per week. In fact, we have considered expanding the citation-based studies to a regular weekly feature.

Ideas for essay topics occur to me almost daily. Letters from *CC* readers suggesting topics are often stimulating. I am also fortunate to have easy access to an extraordinary variety of literature and to meet people from many backgrounds at the conferences I attend. For instance, while in The Netherlands, I spoke with Cornelius le Pair and other Dutch science policy specialists. These conversations made me realize that the essays I did on French,⁴ Canadian,⁵ and other scientists had not been extended to Dutch, Israeli, or Indian scientists. (One might ask why I hadn't gone down a list of countries and done essays on all of them. But my essay efforts are not that systematic. Some things seem hot one day; others hotter the next.) I was thus reminded of interest in more country studies and learned how citation data has been used in a constructive way in The Netherlands and elsewhere to allocate research funds. In one day I got subjects for several future essays.

I often choose a certain topic because I think it will be interesting to many readers. For instance, I realized after visits to the Leprosy Museum in Bergen, Norway, and to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, that I had known little about the disease and that most people were probably uninformed as well. This seemed to be an important topic for an essay because I have access to the bibliographic tools needed to

really investigate the status of leprosy research. Most people who write for the popular science press do not and cannot go to the lengths we do to cite accurately the important work on a subject. This is what sets my essays apart from most science journalism.

Once I have an idea for an essay, I may dictate an outline to one of my secretaries—Sharon Murphy and Mary Livingston. More often I will write out a draft in longhand. Years ago I used to do my own typing, but that is ancient history. I find that I think better with a pen—and I can write nearly anywhere. Since I travel a great deal, I frequently work on planes. There is a discipline imposed by that confined space. Air travel also gives me blocks of time sufficient to produce or edit a draft. I consider these essays my first priority above all other commitments, so they provide an order in my life. The way I see it—if you've got enough time to read these essays, I've got enough time to write them.

I've written much about the ethics of scientific publication.⁶ I feel appropriate acknowledgment of help is quite different from authorship. I assume responsibility for what I write and give credit to those who deserve it. My earliest editorial colleague was my good friend Bob Hayne.⁷ He was responsible for gathering data for many of our journal citation studies. He and Jack Coulson, a veteran ISI programmer, developed an algorithm for generating citation data on journals which is still known at ISI by the name of Hayne-Coulson. Bob also edited my essays. He often wanted to inject allusions to the classics which were beautiful. But their

inclusion would have falsely implied that I had an intimate knowledge of Greek literature. After many long and painful arguments, we agreed that the authorship was mine and that I could only publish essays that truly reflected my knowledge and interests. This agreement remains in effect with my staff today.

Several years ago it became a major logistical problem for me and many readers to keep track of these essays. So we decided to publish them in a series of volumes called *Essays of an Information Scientist*. It has been gratifying to find these volumes generally reviewed favorably. A few years ago the American Society for Information Science named the first two volumes the best information science book of the year. But my greatest satisfaction comes from hearing from respected colleagues. They know who they are and that I like to hear from them.

Since the essays on particular diseases and health-related problems have been so popular, I am hoping to more systematically cover these and collect them in a volume that is useful to lay persons as well as CC readers. And we are just about completing work on a massive study of the 1,000 most-cited scientists. This will not only provide data for a series of essays, but a monograph which I propose to send to award committees wherever I find them.

Having said all this let me reiterate here my appreciation for the help I receive from my ISI colleagues apart from that which is specifically acknowledged in each essay.

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