

Current Comments

Introducing *Current Controversy*—
Reviewing and Digesting the
Popular and Scholarly Press

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Current Contents® (*CC*®) readers are all too familiar with the information explosion. When we talk about the problem, however, we are usually discussing the scholarly literature. But during the past few decades there has also been an explosion in popular and other types of nonscientific literature. Just scanning the new crop of popular science magazines takes a large chunk of your time. No matter how worthwhile many of these publications may be, inevitably you have to face the reality that you can't handle them all. If on top of your scientific reading problem you face the problem of coping with other reading, don't be surprised. Even executives with less of a reading burden are turning to digest and abstract services to help them keep up with the deluge of information.¹

Of course, services like *CC* or our *Automatic Subject Citation Alert* (*ASCA*®) help you to keep up with the scientific literature. The priorities of your own research will determine what you read. But where does this leave you when it comes to covering that literature which really tells you how the public views your work? To put it another way, media which inform the public both directly and indirectly influence government decisions about research support. So a well-informed scientist needs to know not only what

affects research funding, but all the other important issues in society.

In 1975 we added a new feature to *CC* to help readers with this problem. Since then, *ISI*® *Press Digest*² has become a very popular section of *CC*. Its goal is twofold. First, by quoting material from the popular press, we try to show scientists how the public views them. Second, *Press Digest* quotes selectively from professional and scholarly journals. This not only allows readers in a given specialty to gain an idea of what scientists in other fields are doing; it also covers sociological, legal, and economic views of science. Many of our readers have let us know that they enjoy *Press Digest*. They've suggested that *Press Digest* provides a perspective on many issues that is unavailable elsewhere. And many of our readers find it important to have this particular view of what scientists and scholars are doing in other countries.

But *Press Digest* is limited by space to an eclectic, often random, selection of the literature on particular issues. So we have been encouraged to develop the basic idea of this feature into a wholly separate and new periodical. The new periodical is named *Current Controversy* because it was conceived to help scientists, other professionals, and laypersons keep abreast of controversial issues that may have some impact on their

work and lives. Each month, *Current Controversy* will cover from about five to eight controversial topics in depth. Each 8½ × 11-inch issue of eight pages will contain about 70 digests. The articles upon which the digests are based will be drawn from both the popular and scholarly press. As a monthly, *Current Controversy* won't be constrained by weekly deadlines. The idea is to cover fewer topics in greater depth.

As part of the market test for *Current Controversy*, we have prepared a preview issue which is available free on request. If you are already convinced that you would like to be a regular subscriber, there is a convenient order card elsewhere in this issue of *CC*.

The first regular issue of *Current Controversy* will be available early in 1982. Table 1 lists the five major questions dealt with in the preview issue. The pros and cons of these issues are covered by

Table 1: Topics covered in the preview issue of *Current Controversy*.

Do We Need the Space Shuttle?

Should Universities Get a Piece of the Action from DNA Research?

Are Social Sciences Budget Cuts Justified?

Does "Creationism" Belong in Schools?

Tales from the Cryptographers: Do Computer Codemakers Endanger Data Security by Publishing Freely?

a series of digests. For example, Table 2 shows an abridged version of how we intend to deal with the gene-splicing debate.

Current Controversy is designed to cover topics in an evenhanded, objective manner. We will quote articles that give the background you need to understand the major facts behind an issue. Then we will quote articles which provide both, or many, sides of the controversy. This will be done in a systematic fashion and without editorial com-

Table 2: An abridged example of how *Current Controversy* covers a topic.

Should Universities Get a Piece of the Action from DNA Research?

Gene Commerce Proliferating

..."At the forefront of the growth in biotechnology are the genetic-engineering companies, who are eyeing a wide variety of processes ranging from drug production to making plastic out of sugar. With some analysts predicting that the market for biogenetic technology will reach \$15 billion worldwide by the end of the century, the race for gene-splicing products is accelerating. Researchers have already used these techniques to make insulin and the antiviral agent interferon, now being tested as an anticancer drug."

in *US News & World Report*
17 Aug 81, p. 50-4

..."Massachusetts General Hospital has...announced a \$50-million grant from Hoechst, the German chemical company, to fund a new department of genetic engineering.... The Hoechst grant, \$5 million a year for 10 years, will enable Mass General to build a depart-

ment of 100 people. It will be headed by Howard Goodman, a biologist at U. California, San Francisco. The reason for the arrangement is that both Hoechst and Mass General wanted to set up genetic engineering groups, and both had fixed on Goodman as their man. The hospital will own the patents on anything the new department invents, but will grant exclusive rights to Hoechst."

Nicholas Wade in *Science*
212(4499):1122-3, 5 Jun 81

Strong Motivations for Universities to Share Profits

..."The facilities, the atmosphere, and the financial support of universities have provided an essential background for many commercial developments, and the continued connection of the entrepreneur with the university...often gives the entrepreneur a good deal of prestige. It therefore seems just that the university, which can no longer af-

ford to be in the position of a generous parent, should in return receive a share of the profits. In addition, such profit sharing would respond to a widespread and cogent criticism of the present system: that it unfairly allows professors to become rich through developments stemming from tax-supported research."

Bernard D. Davis in *New England Journal of Medicine* 304(20):1232-5, 14 May 81

..."Genetic engineers aren't multiplying fast enough to meet the demand.... Blendow, Crowley & Oliver, a recruiter, sees a shortage for the next five years. New firms lure university-bound molecular biologists by offering double the academic starting salary of \$15,000 and stock options. Firms like Genentech also attract scientists with their research facilities."

in *Wall Street Journal* 5 May 81, p. 1

But University-Corporate Ties Have Thorny Issues

..."New discoveries in biology are becoming commercialized so fast that profit-seeking is 'contaminating' the free and open scientific research that has made new discoveries possible," according to Donald Kennedy, former commissioner of the Food & Drug Admin. and now president of Stanford U. "One problem, says Kennedy, is that academic

biologists who now own a share of new 'biology companies' are abandoning the informal communication that marks most healthy research, partly because of the possible commercial value of new discoveries. 'At least three or four times in the past year,' he reports, a biologist giving a paper at a scientific meeting has 'refused on questioning to divulge some technique' because it was now 'proprietary.' This means other scientists can't repeat and check and build on the technique and is 'not the way' science moves forward, says Kennedy...."

Victor Cohn in *Washington Post*
17 Jun 81, p. A15

..."Worries in the US about university scientists getting contaminated by all that new industrial research money going to their labs are off the mark. The corporate money is not all that much compared with what the feds provide for academic science—a few score millions, against some \$6 billion a year from Washington. But more important, the academic purity that is said to be threatened disappeared from campus along with straw hats.... In its postwar compact with government, and its subsequent linkup with industry, academic science long ago traded its innocence and its independence.... Science is for sale, regardless of its antique rhetoric of free inquiry."

Dan Greenberg in *New Scientist*
91(1262):174, 16 Jul 81

ment. This should give readers a chance to become familiar with all sides of a debate, and leave them free to make up their own minds. We believe that this type of presentation makes it possible for readers to absorb a variety of viewpoints in less time than it takes to read full-length articles.

Current Controversy includes a feature that identifies issues that are likely to become hot topics as well. This feature, "Controversy on the Horizon," consists of several single digests that raise interesting issues likely to be more widely discussed. Many of these topics will be covered in more depth as the controversy becomes full-blown. For many readers, this could be a good way

to prepare for an assault (or to fend one off).

Current Controversy covers an impressive range of periodicals. Our staff reviews major newspapers and news-magazines, like *Christian Science Monitor* and *Time*. We'll be covering journals of opinion ranging from the liberal *Progressive* to the conservative *National Review*. New and old popular science magazines, like *Omni* and *Science News*, will get ample coverage. And we intend to take full advantage of the 6,500 journals in the ISI data base. Scholarly journals, like *Nature* and *New England Journal of Medicine*, will be quoted not only for news and opinion but also for rigorously scientific reports

relevant to the topics under discussion. We'll also be including less familiar material, from the US and abroad, as the need arises.

Our new publication will cover a great deal of science, medicine, and technology, since developments in these fields have such a great impact on our society and our lives. But we won't limit *Current Controversy* to controversial science policy issues. We will also cover controversies in social issues, economics, public affairs, international events, and the arts and humanities. *Current Controversy* should be useful not just for scientists but for professionals and intellectuals no matter what their field. I can even foresee a page or so of *Current Controversy* devoted to a review of reviews. This feature would bring together both the good and bad reviews of a major scholarly work—perhaps even of a serious novel, play, or film.

Not all ideas for *Current Controversy* will be generated at ISI. I'm looking forward to suggestions for controversies to be covered from readers, in the form of letters, clippings, or reprints on topics that could be covered in depth.

It is inevitable that many of the digests in *Current Controversy* will cause readers to want to refer to the original items we have digested. As in *Press Digest*, we provide a complete bibliographic reference with each item we quote. Full texts of many of the digests will be available through ISI's *Original Article Text Service (OATS®)* as well. All necessary copyright permissions will be obtained by ISI from the publishers. For most readers, *Current Controversy* alone should be sufficient for current awareness. But for those readers for whom the topic is particularly relevant, *Current Controversy* provides an excellent starting point from which to do more research.

Current Controversy will discuss some weighty issues. But I don't want to leave the impression that it will be stuffy and humorless. Our emphasis is on readability. Much of the writing we quote is trenchant and witty. Headlines and layout are bright and eye-catching, and we hope to use a cartoon in each issue.

Not the smallest advantage to *Current Controversy* is its size. A lot of *CC* users have told me they like the way they can fit *CC* in their pocket, to pull out for reading on a train, in traffic, or before a meeting starts. *Current Controversy* is also portable. If you carry it with you, you can productively fill time that might otherwise be wasted. And since an annual index of topics will be included, you'll have reason to store your back copies.

Current Controversy is naturally of interest to scientists, physicians, and engineers. But from our experience with *Press Digest*, we believe *Current Controversy* will be followed by many members of your family.

Of course, many librarians now use *Press Digest* for themselves and to keep readers up to date. They have been among the most vocal in suggesting we produce this new service. Public relations workers, corporate officers, and school officials can use *Current Controversy* as an early warning system for developments that might affect their organizations, or as a tool for helping them to shape strategy. Teachers can use it to spark classroom discussions. We believe that broadcasters and science writers and editors in particular can use *Current Controversy* as a starting point for research or as a source of story ideas.

Finally, we hope that *Current Controversy* will interest and stimulate the general reader, in whatever field. It will

spark curiosity, start arguments, give you something to talk about at parties, and help straighten out the biases you can get from other media—perhaps even help you to form your own opinions, clarify them, or even change some of them.

If my enthusiasm for this new project seems unabashed, it's only because it is the culmination of many years of effort not only in producing *Press Digest* regularly but in thrashing out a viable alternative to a *CC* devoted to this vast amount of important published materi-

al. This solution is in no small way due to the efforts of Tom DiRenzo, vice president of direct marketing and communications; Tom Marcinko, *Press Digest* editor; and many others at ISI who are anxious to broaden our information services for the public.

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*Reprinted in: **Garfield E.** *Essays of an information scientist.* Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1980. 3 vols.