

# Current Comments

## A Swan Song for *IBRS*

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In a two-page leading article in the March 1981 issue of *Medical Laboratory Sciences*, A.D. Farr, Royal Infirmary, Foresterhill, Aberdeen, Scotland, wrote concisely about book reviews in scientific journals.<sup>1</sup>

Farr quoted a 1934 doctoral dissertation<sup>2</sup> by S.B. Barnes, who in turn quoted B. Rich, a 1613 author (his work is not given). Rich wrote, "One of the diseases of this age is the multiplicity of books; they doth so overcharge the world that it is not able to digest the abundance of idle matter that is every day hatched and brought forth into the world."<sup>2</sup> That was 368 years ago, in case your calculator is not handy.

Farr reminded us that the editor of the scientific journal, *Le Journal des Sçavans*, recognized the importance of book reviews in his preface to the first issue of that journal in January 1665.<sup>1</sup> Thus, 52 years later, the *Journal* "would not be content to list the titles, but would describe their contents and assess their usefulness. These aims were also broadly followed in the first English language scientific journal, the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, when it appeared four months later."<sup>1</sup>

It is amusing to consider the volume of book publication in the seventeenth century that would make it so difficult to review books in one way or another.<sup>3</sup> I wonder what these learned gentlemen would have said in the face of today's avalanche of monographs.

While many information services of one kind or another list new scientific

books and others selectively review them, there was no comprehensive guide to book reviews until *ISI*<sup>®</sup> started *Index to Book Reviews in the Sciences*<sup>™</sup> (*IBRS*<sup>™</sup>) in 1980. I described *IBRS* to you back in 1979 when it was introduced with some fanfare.<sup>4</sup> *IBRS* was a multidisciplinary index covering reviews of scientific books. The entries were arranged by book author or editor, or by subject. Each entry provided complete bibliographic information on the book as well as on the book review.

When we launched *IBRS*, our market research indicated there was a great need for such a work. However, like so many other needs in society, many of the people who have them cannot afford to satisfy them. As it turns out, there are not enough institutions that can afford to support *IBRS*, so this essay is really a swan song for this service. For the record I'd like to tell you the whole story.

When we introduced *IBRS*, I estimated that approximately 15,000 new books in science and medicine are published each year and that about 50,000 book reviews are published each year. As it turns out, we have picked up about 40,000 book reviews while processing over 3,000 science journals for *Science Citation Index*<sup>®</sup> (*SCI*<sup>®</sup>). We continue to include book reviews in *Social Sciences Citation Index*<sup>®</sup> (*SSCI*<sup>®</sup>) but have not found justification for continuing their coverage in *SCI* simply because there are other primary sources of information, including books themselves, that

merit higher priority. The problem of multiauthored books will now be dealt with in a new ISI online service called *Index to Scientific & Technical Proceedings & Books (ISI/ISTP&B™)*.<sup>5</sup>

There are many factors to consider in the failure of *IBRS* to achieve financial viability. Some publishers might regard \$100,000 in revenue a substantial sum. But at \$300 per year, *IBRS* was purchased by only about 350 libraries. Remarkably, a substantial number of these were small hospital libraries where the purchasing decision on each book is critical and can be delayed long enough to await the appearance of book reviews. Ironically, the libraries best able to afford *IBRS* did not purchase it simply because they can buy so many books without consulting book reviews.

Undoubtedly, we could have sold more copies at a lower price but there did not seem to be any evidence that reducing the price would significantly increase the number of subscribers.

A critical cost element in *IBRS*, of course, was labor. Even though we have to turn every page of every scientific journal we process for our other services, considerable data entry effort is required to include all the elements in a book review—the full title, authors, reviewer, address, etc. Maybe this should have been abbreviated. Indeed, I even wonder now if it was necessary to double-check each entry as we must for *SCI* citations in order to insure accuracy. But these are afterthoughts that only deepen the pain of difficult decisions. We talk about euthanasia for people. It's equally difficult when the euthanasia applies to one of your brainchildren.

*IBRS* represented considerable additional intellectual editing effort, as well. A work of this kind could not be thrown together without creating the impression of a hodgepodge. So when the six-month cumulations were put together, our publications support group staff had to "unify" hundreds of entries that

would otherwise have been listed as separate books. This was because of variations in presentation of citations to the books. They ranged from incorrect or variant spellings of title words in the reviewing journal to some reviewing journals' not listing all of the names of the secondary authors or editors of a book or series of books.

A good example of the problems we ran into can be seen in reviews to Springer-Verlag's *Advances in Polymer Science* series.<sup>6</sup> While reviewing journals consistently cited H.J. Cantow as the primary editor, some reviewing journals chose to list his coeditors while others did not. In order for a title in that series to appear in *IBRS* with all of its reviews under one entry, ISI's staff had to add all of the secondary editors to each review.

In another case, books were often cited under partial titles. Once again, our staff had to reconcile differences or two separate titles would appear for the same book. For example, C.H. Busha and S.P. Harter's book was cited in *Journal of Documentation* under the title *Research Methods in Librarianship*<sup>7</sup> and cited in *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association as Research Methods in Librarianship; Techniques and Interpretation*.<sup>8</sup>

These examples pinpoint some of the logistical problems involved in indexing book review citations. Obviously, if international citation standards such as I have called for in the past were implemented, the literature of book reviews could be more readily indexed and more easily searched.<sup>9</sup>

Even if the gross revenue from *IBRS* had matched the direct production and printing costs, *IBRS* would have represented a drain on ISI's resources. Every product needs to be dealt with at some minimal level of effort. Many printing deadlines must be met. Annual invoices must be mailed, and computer runs and a significant marketing effort must be

made. While we often take pride in the variety of our services, we only do a disservice to the more successful services by maintaining those that have insufficient user support. I have been critical of government agencies that produce information products by subsidy. How can we justify a continuing subsidy to *IBRS* if it does not provide evidence for any level of service viability?

I believe there are two additional important reasons why *IBRS* did not succeed. The first is timeliness. We covered reviews immediately after publication. However, since journals are not under pressure to review books promptly, reviews often appear months if not years after the book has been published. While many of the reviews are scholarly, many are mere recapitulations of content. From my own experience I can say that many reviewers do not have the time, space, or qualifications to produce a scholarly, meaningful review.

The other reason is the publishers' practice of providing free examination of books on approval. The idea behind this promotional technique is simple—once the reader or librarian opens the package there will be some inertia in sending it back. So a good percentage of books examined on approval are purchased. Who needs a book review if you can examine the book yourself? While a librarian might not feel qualified to make a judgment about a book, publishers are betting it won't be sent back.

Many subscribers who cancelled *IBRS* told us they thought it would actually include reviews. This would be a monumental undertaking. Over the years I have felt that the scientific community needed a journal of scientific book reviews—something like the *New York Review of Books*. I remember many discussions with my old friend Chauncey Leake, who created the original "Calling Attention To" in *Current Contents*<sup>®</sup> (*CC*<sup>®</sup>).<sup>10</sup> We discussed a

"review of reviews." This is a concept with double meaning. One kind of review of reviews is a review of review articles. In some subjects there is so much published that such a review is necessary after several years. A review of book reviews is another matter and indeed is not without precedent in the scholarly community.

I have discussed with several book publishers the idea of a journal of scientific book reviews. None of them was at all encouraging. I suggested that publishers pay a standard reviewing fee so that reviews could be commissioned, thereby ensuring timeliness. It is difficult to demand prompt reviews from volunteer reviewers. I doubt that the payment of a page charge influences the quality of reviews, but in any event few publishers would consider this idea. I was surprised considering that \$100 per book was a trivial amount to guarantee that a qualified expert would review a book within 30 days. Without such timing, a book review can't help people who are trying to make purchasing decisions.

You would think there might have been some pressure on libraries from authors to purchase *IBRS*. After all, this is a way authors could find out where their books have been reviewed. I've never heard of such a demand. Possibly few scientists know about *IBRS* in spite of our various ads in *CC* and elsewhere.

When I wrote the essay introducing *IBRS*, I quoted many authorities on the need for book reviews. Scholars and librarians, however, cannot provide actual knowledge of the marketplace. If some government agency wants to sponsor a project that private enterprise cannot afford to carry, here is a candidate. Anyone who would like to step forward to pick up the pieces is welcome to them.

Undoubtedly, there are now many *IBRS* users who will regret our decision. We would have to double the price at its

present level of use to justify continuing it. Since we did not feel this was acceptable, we reluctantly decided to discontinue *IBRS*.

In preparing this essay, I took the step of sending my comments in advance to several *IBRS* users to test their reactions. A few of their comments are included below.

S.C. Lucchetti, University of Michigan Physics Astronomy Library, noted that by the time reviews were published and *IBRS* appeared, books were already out of stock at publishers. This situation developed, he noted, because of the Internal Revenue Service's *Thor Power Tool* ruling<sup>11</sup> which, simply put, makes it uneconomical for publishers (or any business) to keep spare stock. Lucchetti also pointed out that his library attempts to keep a comprehensive collection of astronomy books. Therefore *IBRS* would have been used infrequently anyway.<sup>12</sup>

Lee Ann Bertram, Eli Lilly & Co. Scientific Library, Indianapolis, stated that "if *IBRS* had continued" she "would have used it in weeding the collection

five to ten years hence." By using *IBRS* to see which of the books in her collection came highly recommended she could weed out those that did not. Bertram also noted that *IBRS* "was useful in filling subject voids, but not in the day to day selection process."<sup>13</sup>

One subscriber who prefers to remain anonymous pointed out that economic conditions were the primary reason *IBRS* was rarely used in his midwestern medical school library. With book budgets frozen, there was no point in consulting the service for selection purposes.

We will deliver all 1981 monthly issues as promised and the last six-month cumulation. For those subscribers who were expecting to use *IBRS* in 1982 what can I say after I say, "I'm sorry"? I'm sure that most of them will have no difficulty finding other uses for these already budgeted funds.

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