

Current Comments®

Idiosyncrasies and Errors, or the Terrible Things Journals Do to Us

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Several months ago, I had the pleasure of addressing a meeting of the International Federation of Scientific Editors' Association (IFSEA) in Rehovot, Israel. I was given *carte blanche* on selecting my topic. Since most journal editors are concerned about the accessibility of their publications through secondary information services, I decided to discuss editorial errors and practices that make it difficult for ISI® to accurately cover articles from some journals. In this essay, I'd like to review some of the problems discussed in Rehovot. By so doing, I hope to convince editors that changing some of their practices will insure that information from their journals reaches our readers quickly and correctly.

Longtime *Current Contents*® (CC®) readers may feel I've addressed these issues often enough. I'm convinced that my previous essays on journal practices have persuaded some editors to change their ways.¹ However, many unreasonable practices and errors are still found in even the most prestigious journals. Perhaps the editors aren't concerned that their archaic practices are costing ISI a great deal of money—costs that must in part be passed on to you. Maybe they don't really care how long it takes for our subscribers to obtain information about articles in their journals. Or perhaps, since editors come and go, it is

simply time to teach a new generation the axioms of the past.

It is important for the new generation of editors to realize that thousands of researchers and librarians rely upon CC, *Science Citation Index*® (SCI®), and our other services not only for finding journal articles and books, but also to verify the accuracy of references they cite in new manuscripts.

ISI maintains a large staff of indexers, editors, and information scientists who insure that our products are as accurate and timely as is humanly possible. We have also devised computer programs that check our data bases for accuracy,^{2,3} and we maintain a quality control department that constantly looks for ways to improve our performance. If our staff cannot detect mistakes, or if journal practices make it difficult to deliver timely information, our users suffer. Editors who refuse to change their practices must realize they are wasting not only ISI's time, but also that of researchers and librarians. And much of what applies to ISI also applies to other information services such as Biosciences Information Service.

Since CC is so easy to use, most subscribers think that it is equally easy to produce. This is certainly not the case. For example, many journals aren't covered in CC as promptly as they could be because their contents pages can't be

Figure 1: Example of a contents page that must be recomposed. The narrow lines of type on this page would waste space in *CC*[®].

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directly photographed for publication. Over a third of the nearly 5,000 different journals covered in *CC* have a contents page which we must completely re-compose. The cost of this effort is not trivial.

Why is it necessary to reset so many contents pages? A large number of contents pages are reset simply because of problems in the page size. Since the original journal is not produced with *CC* in mind, the use of excessively wide columns may make it impossible for us to produce legible pages in *CC*. When these pages are reduced enough to fit into *CC*, the type becomes too small to read. The obvious solution to this is for the journal to use wider margins. Some of the most prestigious journals we cover fall into this category. We continually try to persuade such journals to give us a half inch.

If many journals use a column width that is too wide, then the opposite extreme is one that is too narrow. To reproduce such contents pages "as is" would involve an enormous waste of space. The aesthetic value of some of these contents pages is deplorable. In Figure 1, I've included an entry from one such journal.

Another problem related to column width is the use of small type that becomes nearly impossible to read when reduced. If the margins are wide enough, we can sometimes enlarge the contents page. But this is rarely the case and most of these contents pages must be recomposed. In many instances it would require only a minor adjustment in the layout of the contents page to make the journal eminently more readable. It is not productive to single out particular journals here. Some of the problem journals are obvious. But if you are in doubt, ask the editor of your favorite journal if the problem has been discussed at an editorial board meeting.

Another problem I wish readers would bring up with journal editors is the publication of incomplete or ambiguous addresses. This is aggravating for ISI, and other information services, because we include address information in many of our products. It is also frustrating for our readers, who rely on these addresses for their reprint requests.

Some editors don't include addresses in their journals at all. Others make it impossible to tell which author is associated with which of the institutions listed. If there are several authors, and only one address, you can usually assume that all authors work at that address. However, if there are three or more authors and only two addresses, the possibilities for confusion are endless.⁴ The title section of a page from *Journal of Immunology*, shown in Figure 2, demonstrates this confusion. It's impossible to tell who works where.

Figure 2: Example of a confusing list of addresses. Failure to link each author with an affiliation makes it impossible to tell where each author works.

**SPECIFIC *IN VITRO* ANTIBODY RESPONSES BY HUMAN BLOOD LYMPHOCYTES:
APPARENT NONRESPONSIVENESS OF PBL IS DUE TO A LACK OF RECIRCULATING
MEMORY B CELLS**

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Peripheral blood lymphocytes from a number of individual donors were tested for *in vitro* antibody production to influenza A virus. All donors were highly primed, as judged by serum antibody, yet some either for their response to influenza virus. All these donors were highly primed, as judged by serum antibody, yet some either were unable to respond *in vitro*.

Some journals that make it perfectly clear which author goes with which address leave out information needed to get in touch with the author. For example, how can you order reprints conveniently if you're not given the author's department or postal code? The type of address shown in Figure 3 is especially frustrating. Although we are given Lau's department, the postal code and the city in which the university is located are missing.

Editors also like to play "hide and seek" with an author's address. Some editors put the address at the beginning of an article, some at the end. Others place addresses in footnotes, and still others at the front or back of the journal. Journals as prestigious as *Nature* and *Science* use different conventions within the same issue. A lead article has the address up front or in a footnote, while a technical report or a letter has the address at the end of the text. I've said it before and I'll say it again: the name and the address belong on the same page. Preferably, it should be the first page of each article. The majority of journals do this. There is no longer a real justification for these variations.⁴ Could addresses be the first piece of information on which all the world's journals could standardize? Do we need an international postal convention to tell us this? The "Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals," also called the Vancouver style,

attempts such standardization.⁵ It calls for including the addresses of authors on all articles and reprints. However, by not requiring that each author be clearly linked to the appropriate address, it fails to go far enough.

Although these address problems may seem trivial on the surface, they are very important to ISI and to our users. We process nearly one million addresses a year. These appear in the weekly Author Address Directory in *CC*, and in the Source and Corporate Index sections of our citation indexes. We also cumulate them at the end of the year in our *Current Bibliographic Directory of the Arts & Sciences*[®]. When you consider that millions of reprint requests per year are based on these addresses, you'll understand why I'm so disappointed in editors who provide us and their readers with ambiguous and incomplete addresses, or no addresses at all. Why can't editors put themselves in the position of readers who, excited at discovering an important article in *CC*, have to go through the frustrating ritual of digging up the correct address in order to contact the author?

Authors also become frustrated when editors misspell their surnames or use incorrect initials on their papers. This problem is compounded by the fact that researchers citing those papers unknowingly use the incorrect name in citations. Unfortunately, it's impossible for ISI to catch most such errors, and they may

Figure 3: Example of an incomplete address. The city and postal code are missing, making it difficult to contact Lau or order reprints of this paper.

CURVILINEAR FINITE DIFFERENCE METHOD FOR BIHARMONIC EQUATION

P. C. M. LAU

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appear in our products. Though directly attributable to the journals we index, ISI is often blamed for them. We get the "bum rap" for what are clearly sloppy editorial practices.

ISI occasionally receives "bum rap" letters from authors whose names have been misspelled in our products. In most cases, we've been able to trace the mistake directly back to the journal. Sometimes authors notify us when their names have been misspelled in a journal so that the mistake won't be repeated. We received one such letter from a technical information analyst at the Philip Morris Research Center.⁶ She informed us that Richard A. Kornfeld's name had been misspelled in the article shown in Figure 4.⁷ The editor spelled Kornfeld's name with an "i." We would not have detected this error if we hadn't been notified.

When misspelled names appear in citations, our computer can detect the error if the paper has previously been cited a number of times. The computer simply compares the present citation against what has already been recorded in our data base.² Unfortunately, we usually can't tell if a name has been misspelled in a newly published article. Even if we had indexed an article by that author before, we would not be able to tell that the new article had been written by the same person.

Misspelled names, ambiguous addresses, and contents page column

widths that force us to recompose pages for *CC* are the most common, and aggravating, problems ISI encounters. However, journal editors commit a multitude of other sins that make our products appear to be inaccurate, or out of date.

One of the most unethical of these sins is the false publication date.⁸ Most readers don't realize journals are sometimes published months, or even years, later than their cover dates would have you believe. And some publishers are downright devious about concealing their tardiness. They may put the volume, issue, and year on the cover of a journal, but leave out the month. Some journals skip issues altogether, while others publish them out of sequence.⁸

Although ISI notifies readers when cover dates don't correspond to the actual date of publication, these false publication dates make *CC* appear to be out of date. In fact, most time lags are caused by the journals themselves.⁸

False publication dates also wreak havoc in our indexes, making it impossible to produce complete calendar year indexes. When preparing an index, say the 1981 *SCI*, we try to include all 1981 issues of the journals we cover. However, quite a few of the journals with a 1981 cover date didn't actually reach us until well into 1982. These "1981" issues will appear in the 1982 *SCI*. By extending our closing date, however, we are able to index the vast majority of journal issues published in the year covered. Thus, if

Figure 4: Example of a misspelled name. An "i" has been added to Kornfeld's name. (Note: Editing marks were made by ISI® for use in keying data.)

H₂O - cigarette smoke gas phase
interaction /
Richard A Kornfeld, Richard H Newmar, Leonard E Brown Jr and William R Johnson Jr
Philip Morris Research Center, Richmond, Va. 23261 USA

you are trying to verify a reference in *Nature*, *Science*, etc., you can be sure to find it in the appropriate *SCI* calendar year index.

Another inconsiderate and archaic journal practice is the dispersion of references throughout the text of an article. When this happens, ISI indexers must dig through those articles making sure no references are missed. Many of the same journals that disperse references also intersperse notes, comments, or additional explanations in cited references. This is confusing and time consuming for readers and indexers. In most cases, I've found that such footnotes could easily become part of the text or be treated as true footnotes at the bottom of the page.⁹

Several journal editors take a different, but equally aggravating, approach. Instead of placing references at the end of each article, they group all the references together at the back of the journal. While some also code these references so you can tell which article they're associated with, extra time is required to check this code. The extra time spent indexing such references has a cost that must inevitably affect the amount of material we can include in our products.

Among librarians and researchers, it is generally assumed that most journals use only one volume number throughout the year. However, this does not always happen. Some journals are so large that they could not be bound in one volume per year. So it is not always possible to determine the year from the volume number. But it is annoying when a single

volume number is carried over to another year. Researchers may assume that the year they saw on the first issue of that volume is the same year throughout the volume. They may therefore use the wrong year when citing that volume.¹⁰

Even bigger problems are caused by journals such as *Brain Research Reviews*, which carries its own volume and issue number as well as those of its parent journal, *Brain Research*. Authors who cite this journal don't know whether to cite the parent journal's or the review section's issue and volume, or both. The same sort of thing happens when a journal splits into separate editions, differentiated only by letters of the alphabet or subheadings. Inevitably, authors fail to include the letter or the subheading in their citations. Likewise, when a journal changes its name, some authors continue to cite the former title.¹⁰ Usually, there's no way for us to tell when a wrong journal name is used in a citation. When the wrong name is used, readers trying to find the cited article waste considerable time tracking down the correct edition of the journal.

Finally, some journals issue supplements in which articles published in the original journal are republished or expanded. Some authors will cite the original journal in which a paper appeared, while others will cite the supplement. In the Citation Index, citations to that paper may appear in two different places.

All of the problems I've described in this essay cause nightmares for the ISI staff as well as our readers. And, unless editors make some of the changes I've suggested, the situation will worsen as

researchers and librarians come to rely upon computerized information retrieval systems and innovative publication media such as microform and electronically relayed journals. In a recent *Scholarly Publishing* paper, Ann B. Piternick, University of British Columbia, discusses some journal practices that may interfere with the retrieval of information through these media.¹¹ She points out that since *individual* papers may eventually be electronically transmitted, journal editors should now begin to include full bibliographic information and authors' affiliations on the first page of every article. This will insure that papers are properly cited, and that reprints can be ordered. References should also be placed in a standard location, so people searching online can find them quickly. Piternick recommends that editors adopt a standard style for references to make it easier for indexers to key this information into data bases. A standard reference style might also ultimately help researchers who wish to search these data bases by bibliographic elements such as the year, or title words, of a paper.

Incidentally, editors concerned about reference style and journal quality might wish to attend the joint global conference of the Council of Biology Editors, IFSEA, and the Society for Scholarly Publishing, at which such issues will be discussed. This meeting will be held in Philadelphia from May 15 to 20, 1983. Information about the conference is available from Elizabeth M. Zipf, Biosciences Information Service, 2100 Arch Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103.

Space does not permit me to discuss all of the journal practices that prevent ISI from delivering information as quickly and accurately as we'd like. I could devote an entire essay to the reasons journal coverage is delayed in

CC. For example, some contents pages are printed on paper stock that is so dark, or in type that is so light, that the print and background blend into an unreadable morass. Some editors put too much information—for example, article abstracts and academic degrees—on contents pages. Others leave out the titles and authors of book reviews and letters to the editor. A single day's delay spent correcting these problems can mean a week or two in ISI's production cycle.

Editors must come to grips with the fact that they are hurting their readers. An inaccurately cited reference, ambiguous address, or misspelled name translates into a lot of time wasted tracking down articles. These editors must accept responsibility for denying authors the recognition they deserve. Delayed publication schedules, and journal practices that hold up our journal processing operations, postpone coverage of authors' work in our services. Ultimately, this means information about their papers is being withheld.

If you've recognized any of these practices in a journal to which you subscribe or send manuscripts, contact the editor. Your help will not only be appreciated by ISI and the other readers of the journal, but even by the publisher. Recently, the editor and publisher of a journal I criticized were most grateful to be told about a simple improvement that could be made with a minimum of effort. In this case, the publisher simply adopted a practice used in most of the other journals he published. I had complained that even though the first page of every article included the journal's name, date, and pagination, the volume number was omitted. Now the first page of every article contains the full citation so that whenever a reprint or photocopy is consulted, the reference can be cited properly and conveniently. This will help

librarians, since they won't have to write all this information at the top of each copy they supply. Clearly, this editor's failure to include full citation information, and the other problems I've discussed in this essay, could well be de-

scribed as "the terrible things editors do to themselves."

* * * * *

My thanks to Joan Lipinsky Cochran for her help in the preparation of this essay.

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