"current comments"

Should ISI Adopt an Author Fee to Promote Better Dissemination of Dissertations and Other Non-Journal Material?

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A recent doctoral dissertation by C.J. Boyer[1] claims that doctoral dissertations are largely unexploited information sources. He concludes that we should reexamine the rationale of the dissertation. If the purpose of the dissertation is to disseminate information, it would not appear to be fulfilled when from 19 to 50% of all dissertations (depending upon discipline and academic origin) appear to remain unread except by their authors and concerned faculty.

Dr. Boyer has determined by use of the *Science Citation Index*® how frequently 441 dissertations were cited during the eight years just preceding and following their acceptance. Among major causes of uncitedness Boyer lists poor dissemination of information about their existence, and the difficulties of obtaining them when known to exist. He does not point out that much of the journal literature is equally unexploited or uncited.[2-4] However, the dissertation may be uncited for different reasons. Many dissertations are written almost exclusively as a means of obtaining a degree. The author may not even be motivated to submit a brief version for publication in a journal. On the other hand, if the quality of the dissertation does warrant publication in a journal, then the journal article and not the dissertation will be cited. However, Boyer points out that the dissertation has a reason to be cited that most journal literature doesn't. Almost invariably, it contains an excellent review of the relevant literature. This *should* increase the citation of dissertations, since authors find it convenient to cite reviews in order to avoid citing a long list of papers covered in the review. But I suspect few people actually use the dissertation as this form of bibliographical surrogate.

Long-time readers of *Current Contents* will recall that until June 1966 we faithfully listed all dissertations included in *Dissertation Abstracts (DA)*. At that time, the people at University Microfilms decided it was too costly to prepare the list. So we did a survey and found that readers preferred that we devote the space to additional journal coverage.

Had we continued to list them in *Current Contents*, undoubtedly the citation record of dissertations would be better. But if space were not at a premium, then economics would raise its ugly head. It is worth noting that doctoral candidates pay a fee to have their dissertations microfilmed and abstracted in *DA*. Presumably, without the fee, *DA* could not provide the service on the basis of subscription income alone. By analogy, is it less

reasonable to suggest that journal authors pay a fee to have their papers listed and indexed in *Current Contents* and the *Science Citation Index*? An argument against such an arrangement is that subscribers should pay whatever they must to get all "good" material in *CC*® or *SCI*®. This overlooks some painful facts of life. Every information service has a finite budget and a finite market at any point in time. While it can be easily shown that ISI®'s subscribers get more information per dollar spent for every year ISI has been in business, there is a definite limit to the efficiencies ISI can use to stretch its production dollars–just as the average subscriber has a limit on his information budget.

Limitless coverage comes up against limited budgets. Consequently some members of our editorial boards have urged us to cover non-journal material in *CC* and *SCI* if authors or publishers will underwrite the cost with a nominal fee. If a doctoral student *must* afford the $25.00 fee to deposit his dissertation and have it abstracted in *DA*, can't an author be asked to pay a similar fee to have his "monograph" listed by title in *CC* and completely indexed in *SCI*? I appeal to *CC* readers to express their opinions on this subject.

The fundamental objection to this proposal is that our coverage of non-journal material would never be complete. Since some people would never underwrite the cost, while others would, coverage would be somewhat capricious. That objection we can ignore, since no system is going to be complete. Another objection–completely without basis in fact–is that such a system would allow mediocre material to buy its way into ISI's services. That is not true either. We have often resisted the temptation to add subsidized material that was of low caliber. A few years ago, one of the largest corporations in the world, a long-time user of ISI services, suggested we add a list of some 50 journals to our data base. We rejected more than 2/3 of the titles since they didn't meet minimum quality standards. Our position, however, was no different from that of a journal editor who refuses to run an objectionable advertisement. We do our best to resist such pressures, and work hard at maintaining quality within reasonable and sound economic limits.

Dr. Boyer's dissertation has performed a real service in once again reminding us that the well of scientific information is far from dry if we would dig deeper, but we must remain wary of simplistic assumptions. Economics must never be forgotten in evaluating proposed solutions.

1. Boyer, C.J. *The Ph.D. Dissertation: An Analysis of the Doctoral Dissertation as an Information Source.* Dissertation presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Texas at Austin, August 1972, 123 pp.
2. Price, D.J.D. Networks of scientific papers. *Science* 149:510-15, 1965.
3. Kessler, M.M. & Heart, F.E. "Concerning the probability that a given paper will be cited." Research Report No. 6, November 5, 1962, M.I.T. Libraries, 19 pp.
4. Garfield, E. & Sher, I.H. *Genetics Citation Index: Experimental Citation Indexes to Genetics with Special Emphasis on Human Genetics* (Philadelphia: Institute for Scientific Information, 1963), 854 pp., cf. introductory material, pp. i-xviii.