

50 YEARS OF CURRENT SCIENCE—GLEANINGS

PUBLICATION OF SCIENTIFIC ARTICLES*

PUBLICATION in science is the most effective means by which research is encouraged, collaboration between scientific individuals and teams made possible, scientific problems discussed, hypotheses criticised and suggestions made, and scientific information and news disseminated. However, with the phenomenal increase in the applications of science to human welfare and the consequent patronage provided by the public to science, the problem of affording proper publication to scientific studies in relation to the space available in the various journals has become more and more important and difficult. The publication of a research paper is to a large extent based on the co-operation between the author and the editor of the journal in which it is to appear. In this connection, the very pertinent remarks made by Mr. L. J. F. Brimble, Joint Editor of *Nature*, during the course of an address entitled, "Science and the Press" delivered before the Royal Society of Edinburgh recently, deserve careful consideration.

Mr. Brimble draws particular attention to the tendency of authors to send half-baked papers for publication. As he says, it must inevitably be left to the learned societies, editorial committees or individual editors to decide what shall be published, but there is still a tendency these days among scientists to rush into print. More often now than ever before some scientists, having submitted a communication for publication, eventually ask to withdraw it or to be allowed to modify it because they have either discovered an error or have since learnt that some of the work has been done elsewhere. This tendency is also revealed in the appalling state of corrected proofs received from some authors—sometimes peppered with corrections and changes which are anyhow very expensive to make. Rushing into print is also inspired by the bugbear of priority. For example, the request by an author that his communication should be treated as urgent because he has learnt that similar work is being done (usually in the United States) is now treated like the cry of "Wolf! Wolf!" It is happening far too often. How refreshing it is when one team of workers, having heard that another is working along the same lines, gets into touch with the second group and arranges a joint communication!

There is much complaint today concerning the amount of scientific literature which each scientist

must read if he is to keep pace with his own subject. There are many reasons for this overwhelming spate, not the least of which is the over-enthusiasm of scientists themselves. Too many of them imagine that just because they have written a scientific paper it is worthy of publication. The result is that the whole field of our literature extends over a very wide range of scientific merit.

Much of the detail published in a research paper is of limited interest and value. Men of science might well consider publishing only the main points of their research and filing the rest for possible reference. It was the late Lord Rutherford who once said that when writing a letter to *Nature* if you cannot say all that is really necessary in 500 words or less, then something is wrong.

It may not be a bad idea, according to Brimble, if every communication submitted were returned without even being read, with a covering note asking: (1) Are you sure you have said what you want to say? (2) Have you said it in the minimum number of words? (3) Is it worth saying at all? Too many scientists, especially the younger ones, seem to assume that the value of a scientific paper varies directly as its length. It might therefore be strongly urged that men of science thoroughly train themselves to keep their pens dry until they know the facts or are sure of what they wish to say.

There is no doubt about it that although scientific publications are a valuable contribution to the unity of knowledge, the very great output of records of research has placed scientific societies and journals in a difficult position. The years since the War have also seen the publication of many new learned journals. Some of these have certainly filled important gaps; but by and large one may not say that all this additional publication goes far in solving the problem.

The long rows of periodicals on our library shelves continue to grow; but still the papers come in and the rate of flow increases. This may be a healthy growth in that it reflects the developing activities of men of science, but some form of control seems desirable, for there are all sorts of practical difficulties involved, and the time might well come when it will be impossible to print all the papers, much less read those which are printed. Surely, therefore, we should make it our business to see that our scientifically acquired knowledge is rightly stated if it is to be rightly used.

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