

Untitled and Anonymous Editorials And Other Forms of Provincialism

By Eugene Garfield

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For several decades *Current Contents* was the vehicle I used for personal expressions of pleasure or discontent about various practices in science and scholarship. Remarkably, even after decades in some cases, not much has changed since I first voiced an opinion on subjects such as anonymity.¹

One of my pet grievances with scientific and other publications has been the implied use of the editorial "we" and its expression in the form of anonymous editorials. Whether in *Nature* or the *New York Times* we all know that an individual wrote those unsigned comments. But especially in the British science press--for example, the *New Scientist*--the unsigned, anonymous editorial is used to add authority to the views expressed. Indeed, I cringe whenever one of our own staff writers or freelancers says that so and so "told *The Scientist*" this or that. Give me a break. He told the reporter--someone with a name. Was he interviewed in front of the entire editorial department?

Countless journals and magazines publish unsigned editorials--by editors seeking to enhance their authority by this ploy. However, John Maddox, one of the great science editors of the past century, usually signed his editorials. He did not need anonymity to enhance the authority of his opinions. If anonymous and unsigned editorials are not enough,

there are also countless "untitled" commentaries and letters published in scientific journals. I thought of this recently as I gazed at the dozens of "untitled" paintings by Mark Rothko at an exhibition at the U.S. National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Later in his life Rothko assigned simple serial numbers to "describe" his works. Such literary license is taken by hundreds of science editors purporting to communicate information for worldwide consumption.

I searched the *Science Citation Index*® (*SCI*) using the Web of Science at the University of Pennsylvania library and found no less than 2,000 "untitled" items indexed in 1997. Half of them were editorials. The other half were letters from readers. None were tagged with relevant key words. Further, most of the editorials were published without addresses. These editors assume incorrectly and somewhat arrogantly that all readers have immediate access to the printed journal, not recognizing that they are frequently read in the form of photocopies or online. If an e-address were provided to facilitate communication, or a postal address, your letter to the author would have to say, "Dear Dr. Bloggs: I read your untitled letter in the *Journal of Non-Communicating Science*."

I once characterized such behavior as "provincial".² It is a provincialism that sometimes smacks of arrogance and places little value on input from the world outside the invisible college that constitutes the regular readership of that journal. While linguistic provincialism has been significantly reduced in the past 20 years, it still takes expression in hundreds of journals published in foreign national or regional journals.

These same journals resent being characterized as of low international impact, yet they refuse to make the concession of including an English title or abstract for much of their content. Although English has become the common language of the international scientific community, and in particular the European Union, these local journals often bemoan the fact that they are not cited by those who do not read the language in question. And though English translations will not guarantee citation, they certainly would improve worldwide communication.

Since I view the entire corpus of journals indexed by the *SCI* to be my personal domain, and since I am not fluent in

Chinese, Japanese, or Russian--no less German, French, Spanish, and Italian--I wonder why these folks don't make it possible for me to read a good summary in English. I've been trying to use the Alta Vista system of machine translation to solve this problem, but my experience with translating abstracts and texts is less than satisfactory. After the significant effort of OCR scanning and proofreading, the resulting translations leave much to be desired.

If editors of vernacular journals do not want to devote the space to publishing multilingual renderings of their journals in print, why not include them on the Web? I've rarely encountered an editor who could not prepare a translation of his own work. It doesn't have to be completely idiomatic or grammatical to be understood. I've always been happy to edit such translations in gratitude for the effort I am spared in doing word-for-word translation with a dictionary.

Eugene Garfield is president and editor-in-chief of *The Scientist* .

1. E. Garfield, "Le Nouveau Défi Américain," *Current Contents*, 15:5-10, April 11, 1977; E. Garfield, "Is French Science Too Provincial?" *La Recherche*, 7:757-60, 1976; E. Garfield, *Essays of an Information Scientist*, Vol. 3, Philadelphia, ISI Press, pp. 88-102, 1977.