""""""current comments"

Should Journal Publication Dates Be Controlled by Legislation?

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In every issue of Current Contents ® there are at least two dozen or more contents pages bearing dates of "publication" which are, for all intents and purposes, meaningless. Only a fraction of the world's scientific journals appear "on time". This condition is symptomatic of lax management attitudes pervading the scientific establishment. The publication of a September issue in January, as was recently the case for one of the leading journals of physics, is completely irresponsible. The impact of science and technology on society need not be elaborated upon. Communications media that report on science are turned off by "old" news. If in fact the information contained in such leading journals is worth publishing in expensive type-set publications, then surely it is worth printing on time. The cost of maintaining rigid publication dates and deadlines is small compared to the cost to individual scientists and to society. For every paper that is published late some person or group is forced to become a mini-publisher, disseminating papers as preprints.

Thousands of journals are regularly published late. Most of them make no pretense that they will ever catch up. So why persist in using false publication dates? The day a journal "hits the street" is the date which should appear on its cover. The adoption of this simple convention would save considerable

agony in libraries, purchasing departments, etc. The implementation of such a rule by legislation is often suggested, and tempting to adopt.

There is something you can do about this. Write to your favorite journal or those edited by your friends. Point out that Current Contents does not wish to call absurd publication dates to the attention of readers. But, we are forced to do so because otherwise, readers blame us if we don't. We are not perfect. Naturally there are occasions when we inadvertently miss an issue of a journal-in spite of an elaborate system for insuring that the postal system does not control our destiny completely. But when one processes 5,000 different publications which publish about 50,000 issues per year, something inevitably goes awry. Strikes, accidents, etc. all can and do occur. But any individual editor knows approximately when his latest journal issue should have appeared in Current Contents. If it hasn't he is urged to contact us. Any reader is implored to inform us when he knows a journal is late in CC. We are proud to say "we are not proud". We guarantee to cover every journal completely and with the utmost speed commensurate with cost and practicality. Readers of CC should certainly see the contents pages of foreign journals before they receive the journals themselves. The speed and timeliness of *Current Contents* has been its most singular contribution to scientific communication throughout the world.

But it is a job that must be pursued with constant vigilance and we will not turn down assistance from any source.

If you write or call your favorite journal, ask the editor if he is using an accurate publication date and also whether he is doing everything possible to get his journal covered promptly, not only by *Current Contents*, but all of the current awareness media.