

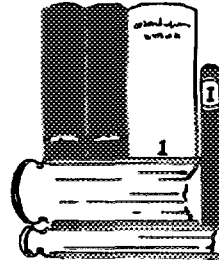
# THE INFORMATORIUM

---

June 1, 1965

## IS THE "FREE REPRINT SYSTEM" FREE AND/OR OBSOLETE?

Scientists at the Rockefeller Institute recently characterized the present reprint distribution system as an anachronism (1). I agree. In the present system the author pays rather than the reader. Since a small percentage of the world's scientists publish a large percentage of the papers (Lotka's Law) (2), this creates inequities. Presumably the underlying ethic is "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours", but many scientists (especially our British colleagues) find this disturbing. Some of their more affluent American colleagues may not find the cost of reprints a problem, but most find both the system and the cost a growing nuisance. Many scientists fail to realize that the overall costs of the "free reprint system" are not trivial. In addition to the cost of printing an appropriate request post card, form letter, or original letter, there is the time spent to look up the address, and the time to type or write the correct citation. Then there is the cost of postage and envelopes and, for the requestor, there is the cost of control. For the author, there are the expenses of ordering the reprints, postage, processing the request mail (which can be quite distracting if there is a great deal) and the preparation of the return mail.



Some people have rather elaborate inventory control systems to determine whether the reprint ultimately arrives. Many reprints never do. Supplies may be exhausted or non-existent. The author may be preoccupied with current experiments, on leave, or at a new institution. It is difficult to measure the cost of the unreturned items, though special trips to the library and eventual photocopying must be included. (Recently one library reported the duplication of about 200,000 articles in one year (3)). Many scientists and librarians use services such as ISI's Original Article Tear Sheet service (OATS). At \$2.00 per article (for up to twenty pages) and with one-day service, the simplicity and efficiency of the OATS system is hard to beat.

More recently Pickwell and Douglas (4) and Prouse (5) deplored the idea of disrupting the present reprint exchange scheme. They correctly indicate that many excellent contacts are established through reprint requests. However, new schemes for distributing reprints or photocopies do not have to impair our ability to communicate with each other. In certain instances, anonymity is preferred. Since the present reprint system is basically inefficient, its ultimate overall effect is to reduce communication and research productivity. Simplification is long overdue. ISI's new ASCA and ASCAMATIC services provide such simplification. ASCA eliminates the effort required to fill out an OATS card, reprint request card, or interlibrary loan form. ASCAMATIC goes one step further--tear sheets are delivered automatically. Administrators interested in saving both professional and clerical time should welcome this new approach. The true costs of "free reprints" ought not be brushed under the overhead carpet.

#### REFERENCES

- (1) A.F. Hofmann, et al., "Reprints: A Proposal", *Science* 146(3649), 1251 (1964).
- (2) A.J. Lotka, "The Frequency Distribution of Scientific Productivity," *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences* 16, 317 (1926) cited in D.J. Price, *Science Since Babylon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 106.
- (3) J.A. Martin and M.S. Ferguson, "Photocopying in a Researching Library," *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 52(2), 410-413 (1964).
- (4) G.V. Pickwell and E. Douglas, "Reprint System Debated," *Science* 147(3659), 677 (1965).
- (5) G.A. Prouse, "Reprints Abroad," *Science* 148(3668), 313-314 (1965).