

How is the ISI Press Digest Doing?

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Three months ago, we launched the *ISI® Press Digest*. It appears in *Current Contents®* each week on the pages following my editorial.¹ Recently we surveyed about 200 editorial advisory board members and subscribers. Most responded with generous and enlightening comments. Given the choice between the *Press Digest* and the same space for journal contents pages, almost all chose the *PD*.

The choice is gratifying for several reasons. Readers have confirmed my assertion, made most recently in connection with non-journal coverage,² that *CC®* is doing its basic job. From previous surveys we know that in matters of journal coverage, there can never be too much of a good thing. Their choice of *PD* indicates a change in priorities. The need to bridge the communication gaps between different areas of science and scholarship, and between science and the lay public is confirmed.

Readers have noted that the material we select and digest in *PD* does not always come from the *lay* press, as *PD's* name might imply. *PD* has turned out to be something of a hybrid. Material is also selected from the *scholarly* press. Half the digests are from journals covered in some edition of *CC*, but primarily from *CC/Social, Behavioral & Educational Sciences*. These are the areas which most readers

of other *CC* editions need covered. Occasionally, *PD* does pick up a 'technical' article of seemingly narrow specialty interest. For example, we found worth noting and speculating about virogenous parthenogenicity in turkeys, and the alleged audibility of auroral flares. But we will rarely comment on technical articles. What can we possibly contribute by digesting papers on Poly-A or paramagnetic shift in NMR spectra?

Perhaps the most surprising reaction to *PD*--surely an off-beat testimonial--was one reader's annoyed suggestion that we should provide digests for *all* the articles listed in *CC*. I happen to think his instincts reflect the wave of the future. I've indicated before the value of Bernier's suggestion that editors publish terse conclusions.³

It may be useful for you to know how *PD* is put together. Each week I scan all six *CC's*, and about two dozen other magazines, periodicals, and newspapers. I also receive clippings from ISI personnel and others. From these I select about 50 items. These are turned over to our senior editor, Robert Hayne, about whom you will hear more in a future editorial. Hayne goes through the selected articles, and prepares the digests. Unfortunately he can use only a fraction of the material he receives, since we can print no more

than 25 or so digests each week.

I review the digests in typescript. Therefore, I assume full responsibility for them. Frequently I approve a comment or implied opinion that I don't personally agree with. Hayne's combination of wit, irony, and literary verve makes producing the *PD* an enjoyable experience for us both. Apparently a large number of readers agree that the result is worth their time as well.

When we first announced the *Press Digest*, we said that it would call attention to science in the press, not just as ISI or science itself might like to see things, but *as it is*. Despite that warning, I've received a number of letters *chiding me because we have highlighted articles that some readers found antiscientific, antihumanist, or anti-rational*. Recently I was called reactionary because we digested some anti-abortion articles. I suggested to the irate reader that he turn his energy into more constructive channels. He could write his elected representatives, his local newspaper, or the editors of the journals that had published the articles in question.

Such reactions do reveal the necessity for repeating this important purpose of *PD*. We must report good *and* bad interpretations of science in the press. So-called popular periodicals frequently have excellent summaries or surveys of scientific topics that readers of *CC* may likely find interesting or useful for a variety of reasons. But some of these same periodicals present

bowdlerized "information" that scientists and technologists should be aware of. The public impact of the large-circulation magazines in which they are published is significant.

In presenting material in the *Press Digest*, we reserve the right to express our own opinion, subliminally or otherwise--indeed, it's probably impossible to avoid doing so. The mere selection of an item is an expression of opinion. If, however, we go too far, learn to complain!

It is very frustrating not to be able to select all the interesting material our scanning produces. It is equally frustrating not to be able to digest all we select. There are days when I wonder why newsmen find nothing to write about except Skylab. Otherwise, I think the press is doing a reasonably good job. If the individual layman was exposed to the combined output of all these writers, the problem of gaining public support for science would be lessened significantly.

1. Garfield, E. *ISI's Press Digest* helps narrow the gap between the scientist and the layman. *Current Contents* No. 20, 16 May 73, p. 5-6.
2., New section in *CC/LS* designed to cover the non-journal literature. *Current Contents* No. 35, 29 August 73, p. 5-6.
3. Bernier, C.L. Terse literatures, I. Terse conclusions. *J. Amer. Soc. Inform. Sci.* 21: 316-319, 1970.