

Timeliness and Timelessness

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During a recent visit to India I took advantage of the occasion to ask my hosts, several of whom were editors of journals, why India could build an atomic bomb but could *not* get journals out on time.

I was taken aback to be asked in reply why I was so 'uptight' about publication dates. "What is the damage," asked my host, "if a July 1974 issue of the *Indian Journal of Experimental Biology* appears in a February 1975 issue of *Current Contents*®?"

At first I became defensive. I asserted that our readers often believe that this type of "time-lag" is caused by some failure on the part of ISI. Time-lag studies delight critics of indexing services. In such cases they 'credit' us with an eight-month delay even when we have indexed the journal within a week after receipt.

More important, however, is the fact that a journal date, like the date on which a patent is issued, has significance in the priority scheme of science.

Priority, of course, is a fact of scientific life.<sup>1</sup> I remember one doctoral candidate who was judged not to have done original research because he was anticipated by a foreign scientist who had submitted a manuscript to a journal shortly after my friend began his research. The journal was a year late. My friend did not know about the prior paper until he himself was ready to publish. Was it fair to allow this student to embark on what he thought was

original research when the outcome was already embedded in the choked channels of scientific communication?

If the scientific communities of developing countries are to become truly integrated with those of the industrially advanced countries, they must take more seriously the problem of publication dates.

It would also help if journals were received as soon as possible after publication. Many Indian editors would like to send their journals to the US and elsewhere by air, but the Indian government seems little interested. Perhaps my visit to India will help effect a solution. Since most transcontinental flights are half empty these days, why doesn't Air India carry a sackful of Indian journals? The Indian government might subsidize this scheme to help improve the image of Indian science. Alternatively, the government could subsidize the postage required for air-mail delivery.

There are also some practical steps that journal editors can take to get caught up. Instead of issuing a journal months after the cover date, why not reduce the size of the next three or four issues to accelerate the publication schedule? I believe realistic cover dates would be welcomed by most subscribers.

Another but less desirable expedient is to put out a series of 'combined' issues. For monthlies, each would cover a two-month period. This can be done to catch up, but should not

become a way of life, since it constitutes an indirect price increase.

Not all Indian journals are late. And by no means are all late journals Indian. Many American, Japanese, French, Italian, and other journals seem to have equally casual attitudes toward publication dates. In contrast, the Soviet journals—which I have not been reluctant to criticize for the mediocrity of many of their articles—must be given a grade of A for regular delivery of their journals. However, the Soviet publishing houses, like so many others, don't yet comprehend the importance of air delivery. Bureaucrats in all countries have a shortsightedness that is inadequately described by the term *myopic*. One would think that Soviet propagandists would be more concerned with the image of Soviet science in the Third World, if not in the West. Then, again, the Soviets may not be in any hurry to deliver their journals because they know that even when they arrive, almost no one can read Russian!

Delayed publication can be caused by labor disputes, paper shortages, and catastrophic acts of God. But over the long term the overriding cause is inertia. Therefore, a copy of this essay could be sent as an unobtrusive hint to editors of a great variety of journals. It would help if readers, many of whom serve on editorial boards, would bring this problem to the attention of editors whose schedules show a need for awareness of it. Just as we have asked

you to complain to us,<sup>2</sup> why not complain to them?

ISI will continue to regard punctuality and regularity of publication as important criteria for the selection of journals. As justice should be tempered with mercy, our journal selection procedure will be tempered with a merciful consideration of local problems and unusual circumstances—but eventually, unchanging “temporary” problems must be regarded as permanent.

My Indian host may have been asking me in essence: “Why the hurry?” Is “all possible speed” inevitably the optimum pace? I cannot say that it is, any more than I can here and now answer those who question the inherent social values of ‘progress’. My host may well have been suggesting an ethnocentricity in my attitude that he found amusing, perhaps even lamentable. But does an emphasis on punctuality demand the sacrifice of aspiration to Nirvana? Does a requirement of timeliness disrupt an appreciation of the rewards of the meditative life? Does a pressure for prompt communication deny such timeless statements of serenity as the Somnathpur temples at Mysore? Such questions are beyond detailed discussion here. But I am sure of this: as, by choice or necessity, the timeless regions of the world enter the technological age, they cannot but learn to appreciate that timeliness can be an advantage, if not necessarily a virtue.

1. Merton R. K. Priorities in scientific discovery. *Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 22:635-59, 1957. Reprinted in: Merton R. K. *The sociology of science; theoretical and empirical investigations*, ed. & intr. by N. W. Storer (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago

Press, 1973), 605 pp. — The essay appears as Chapter 14 on pp. 286-324.

2. Garfield E. Don't kill us with kindness—COMPLAIN! *Current Contents*® (CC) No. 6, 10 February 1975, p. 5-6.