

Current Comments®

EUGENE GARFIELD

INSTITUTE FOR SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION®
3501 MARKET ST., PHILADELPHIA, PA 19104

Journal Selection for *Current Contents*: Editorial Merit vs. Political Pressure

Number 11

March 18, 1985

Over the years, I have attempted to explain the procedures we use to select journals for coverage in *Current Contents*® (*CC*®). In 1979,¹ I discussed some of the criteria we established to help guide us in our selections. These general guidelines are briefly outlined at the end of this essay. Recently, a few journal editors and publishers have taken the position that coverage in *CC* is a "right" to which any journal is entitled. Without regard to our budgetary limitations and editorial considerations, they contend that coverage in *CC* can mean life or death for their journals. They argue that many authors will not choose to submit articles to a journal that is not included in *CC*. In particular, editors of some journals that only appear in other *CC*s are concerned that their journals won't be brought to the attention of enough basic scientists unless they also are covered in *Current Contents/Life Sciences* (*CC/LS*).

It is a great compliment that many editors feel that coverage in *CC/LS* is so vital. One publisher even filed suit in a US federal court. To make a case, one of his arguments was that our failure to list his publication in *CC/LS* constituted an antitrust conspiracy between ISI® and the publishers of allegedly competitive publications. The case was dismissed and an appeal to a higher court will not be attempted. The decision was gratify-

ing. It confirms that we can continue to select journals on the basis of merit and sound editorial judgment. In any event, I would not rely on our legal rights to exclude a journal for trivial or frivolous reasons.

There is some irony in the attempt by certain journals to argue that *CC* is indispensable to their survival, since many journals we cover take a rather casual attitude on this matter. It's a perfect example of the "haves" versus the "have nots." Almost 10 years ago, I described the resistance of certain professional society journals to any change. This included budging even a half-inch on the width of their contents pages.² They obviously do not consider it a matter of life or death that they be covered in the best possible fashion. And when we suggested that certain large journals correct some absurd editorial practices, there was no rush to follow our advice. In particular, I criticized journals that create bibliographic chaos when they split in parts and name the ensuing parts with six- and seven-word titles.³

The fact is that if a journal is important enough, we must attempt to cover it no matter how resistant the editor is to modernization or adherence to international standards. An added irony is that some of these journals are very prestigious. Certain authors try very hard to publish in such journals. However, a

study by M.D. Gordon,⁴ Hambro Life Assurance, Swindon, England, showed that authors don't always want to publish in the larger journals. Indeed, it may be true that an author will more readily publish in a more recently established journal provided that it is covered in *CC*. Most people do not want to feel that their work will be buried in an obscure journal. But their feelings of loyalty to an emerging specialty may create ambiguous feelings. They don't know whether to try for the established journals or the new ones trying to become established.

Self-Interest

What was particularly interesting about the case mentioned earlier is the method this publisher originally used to put pressure on us to cover his journal in *CC*. He prompted dozens of authors who had published articles in the publication to write to me. Many wrote well-reasoned letters. Others, however, were emotional and even vituperative. The primary message from all of them was one of self-interest—"This is our specialty. It is too important to be left out of *CC/LS*. You are damaging our careers by denying us a listing in *CC/LS*."

This form of political pressure is not without precedent. We have been subjected to letter-writing campaigns in the past for a variety of reasons. One of these campaigns stemmed from the rejection of a journal that focused on nutrition and cancer. Although the journal included some interesting papers, the *CC* editions in which it would be included already provided in-depth coverage of these areas. We contacted our editorial advisory board members and readers with expertise in this field. They confirmed that the cancer and nutrition journals that we already covered in *CC* carried the best selection of articles on the subject.

"Incorrect" *CC* Edition

Many of the letters we receive are from authors who are upset because they feel a journal is covered in the "wrong" *CC* edition. This is mainly a problem with clinical journals covered in *Current Contents/Clinical Practice (CC/CP)* but not *CC/LS*. We generally explain to these letter writers that if a clinical journal has a high enough impact and is largely relevant to basic researchers, it will be covered in *CC/LS*. But *CC/CP* is the proper forum for journals that primarily are directed at clinical investigators and practitioners. Only a small group of those clinical journals that publish papers concerned with basic mechanisms can be covered in *CC/LS*.

Dropped Journals

We also hear from readers when certain journals are dropped from various *CC* editions. ISI's selection specialists are constantly reviewing *CC* coverage to make sure we include the most important journals in each field. In many cases, journals we selected many years ago fail to demonstrate sufficient continuing impact. In order to prevent inordinate growth in *CC* and the *Science Citation Index® (SCI®)*, we must delete journals, if for no other reason than to add other new or more pertinent publications. For example, many of the state medical journals originally covered in *CC/CP* have been dropped to make room for other clinical journals that interest a wider sector of our international readership. We do not have the resources nor the mandate to cover everything published in the world in one or more editions of *CC*. And there are many readers who prefer that we don't, even if we could.

Indeed, we believe most readers prefer that we remain selective. But they are by no means as vociferous as those who

would have us cover "just one more journal." This reminds me of the opening tune in the musical play, *Oliver*.⁵ Our replies must often sound like the "more?" of Mr. Bumble, the Scrooge-like head of Oliver's orphanage, when Oliver asks for a second helping. But *CC* is neither a philanthropic foundation nor a government agency. Like every sensible journal editor, we have to say no as often as we say yes.

Every decision not to use or to drop a journal in *CC* is agonizing, both for us and the journal involved. Like the authors of rejected manuscripts, we empathize with the editors and publishers of the journals we reject. But if we are to make any attempt at quality filtering of the literature, we must make these hard and painful decisions. We've developed useful, but not always perfect, techniques for identifying the core journals of the fields we cover. We must practice what we preach if *CC* is to remain useful to as many readers as possible.

In the past few years, in addition to US journals, a number of foreign clinical journals have also been dropped from *CC/LS* in order to keep costs down. These journals continue to be covered in *CC/CP*. We don't do this indiscriminately. We hope that readers who live in the countries involved will understand our position. These decisions are not political or nationalistic. They are based on the criteria enumerated in this essay. We continue to cover all leading clinical journals in *CC/CP*. But, as I mentioned before, *CC/LS* is aimed primarily at basic research scientists. In it we must, and do, cover high-impact journals containing significant biomedical research reports. Coverage of the worldwide clinical literature is provided in *CC/CP*.

Decisions to add or drop journals are never irrevocable. Several years ago we dropped a journal from *CC*. We heard from many readers who argued that this

journal should be covered. But it was not the number of letters that ultimately led to the reinstatement of this journal. Rather, it was the documented evidence we received from one reader.

I cite these cases to stress an important point. We wish to encourage well-reasoned letters from readers. But we will not make editorial decisions on the basis of a pressure campaign. Imagine what would happen to your favorite journals if manuscripts were selected by this method!⁶

Annual Ballot

In the past, we have considered the idea of an annual poll of readers so they could nominate new journals. We could send *CC* readers a list of the thousands of journals we cover. They could check off the journals they prefer. In this way, they might democratically determine which journals would maximize their collective satisfaction. It's an interesting exercise to consider. But most readers would not be in a position to estimate the true cost of each selection. A vote for the *Journal of Immunology*, which occupies about three and a half pages of *CC/LS* each month, represents more than three times the cost of including *Clinical and Experimental Immunology*, which takes up only one page. Likewise, including a weekly journal is much more expensive than including a journal that is issued monthly or quarterly. We also would have to consider the problem of weighting the ballots. If not, we would be catering to the well-endowed individuals or institutional subscribers. Many copies of *CC* are read by dozens of individuals at one institution. And in some countries by hundreds.

In any case, such a procedure would not necessarily represent the best editorial judgment. As I've indicated before, the reasons people want a particular

journal covered in *CC* may be political. I can remember a time when some readers insisted that we had to cover all physical chemistry journals in *CC/LS*. The majority of those who insisted were regular readers of the *Journal of Physical Chemistry*. Most *CC* subscribers who are physical chemists read *CC/Physical, Chemical & Earth Sciences (CC/PC&ES)*. However, those who are strongly interested in biochemistry also have access to *CC/LS* in their departmental libraries.

Comprehensive or All-Inclusive?

A single edition of *CC* simply cannot provide perfect and complete coverage for every possible reader at every reader's point on the continuum between the core disciplines. Our objective is comprehensive coverage of the world's most important journals. But comprehensive does not mean all-inclusive. The success of *CC/LS* is partly due to the fact that most of its readers already find more than they need in it. Indeed, there is considerable sentiment that we should do everything possible to contain the proliferation of journals—not to encourage it. Between containment and discouragement, there is considerable latitude. As I argued in the *New England Journal of Medicine*,⁷ there is nothing we can or should do to prevent the legitimate "proliferation" or "twigging"⁸ of journals. Twigging is a term coined by the late Curtis G. Benjamin, former president, McGraw-Hill Book Company, to describe the fractionation of scientific knowledge and, therefore, of the subject matter of scientific publications. However, as Elliot M. Berry, Hebrew University, Hadassah Hospital, Jerusalem, pointed out,⁹ many publishers try to establish journals for which there is not yet an adequate market.

Rip-Offs

I continue to insist that we should not encourage rip-offs¹⁰ by publishers, especially those who are in a position to "shape up, or ship out." Libraries are hard-pressed to meet their budgets. And I would guess that they join me in being irritated by journals that cannot meet the basic criteria for timeliness or regularity. Why should any journal continue to falsify publication dates if it is not to hide an inability to meet a subscription obligation? I can well understand temporary production and other factors that cause journals to be delayed. In any issue of *CC*, one can find respected journals that occasionally are two or three months behind. If this persists for too long, perhaps the editor should change the publication frequency from, say, a bimonthly to a quarterly. If the publisher is unresponsive, then subscribers should voice their objections directly to him or her, not us. We must continue to cover important journals. But we certainly should not encourage such practices by adding new journals that are already six months to a year behind and show no signs of improvement.

Retroactive Coverage

Nothing I've said prevents us from selecting an important journal for retroactive coverage in the *SCI* or in our other databases. If our analyses show that a journal has achieved significant impact in spite of its publication lags, we will include all back issues so that these articles can be retrieved in the future. We should not penalize those authors who submit important manuscripts to a new journal because they believe there is a need for the journal's existence. One should not forget times in the past when publication of some classic papers was delayed for years. But if we are to re-

strain the unwarranted perpetuation of new or old journals, then there comes a time for euthanasia.

Advertising

We recently reintroduced the advertising section in *CC*,¹¹ because we not only have to deal with inflation of journals, but also economic inflation. If publishers believe that *CC* is vital to the life of a new journal, we encourage them to use the advertising section to issue a call for papers. This should be done well in advance of the launching of the journal.

Page Charges for *CC*?

This has inevitably led to the question: Should we cover journals that wish to pay a page charge? Many journals require that authors pay page charges. L.M. Van Valen, professor of biology, University of Chicago, Illinois, describes this practice as "discrimination by journals against impecunious authors."¹² He claims that "it is a moral issue as much as a practical one." If we allowed certain well-heeled publishers to "buy" coverage in *CC*, would we be compromising ourselves? And what about journals from developing countries and elsewhere who would like to be covered but cannot afford the page charge, perhaps because they don't have the foreign currency?

An option we've considered is a separate supplement to *CC* consisting of contents pages for which publishers have paid page charges. This might be sent to all *CC* subscribers. If the journal eventually met our selection criteria, it would be covered regularly in the relevant edition of *CC*. Alternatively, we could include in the various *CC* editions a list of new journals submitted to ISI for coverage. Readers could then let us know their preferences.

Initial *CC* Coverage

Many readers of *CC/LS* have asked how we determine which journals to cover in this publication. The answer is complex, and involves some knowledge of the history of ISI. I've told this story before, but it is a subject that needs repeating every few years. Some readers may forget or many new ones may never have heard the story before. When *CC* first appeared over 25 years ago, we did not have the *SCI* to help us select journals. So we used subjective criteria to select the most important journals. Just as any experienced scientific publisher or librarian could have compiled the basic list, so did I.

At that time, most *CC* readers were pharmaceutical scientists whose broad range of needs included chemistry, experimental medicine, and so on. Did anyone really have to be convinced that *Nature*, *Science*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *The Lancet*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the US*, *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, and other journals of similar caliber should be covered? Not really. I have explained *ad nauseam* that these intuitive choices are backed up by all sorts of objective data. The same basic group of hard-core journals continues to maintain its quality year after year. A few may gradually decline or disappear as editors and audiences change. But most successful journals have an uncanny way of surviving and growing. This parallels the growth of science itself.

Pure Chemistry in *CC/LS*

A large number of organic chemists associated with pharmaceutical and chemical companies subscribe to *CC/LS*. However, new compounds and syntheses are reported to many of them in *Current Abstracts of Chemistry and*

Index Chemicus[®] or *Current Chemical Reactions*[®]. Nevertheless, we plan to do a new reader survey in the near future to determine which journals are most useful to subscribers of each *CC* edition. Perhaps this will help us determine how much coverage of pure chemistry in *CC/LS* is justified. If readers felt pure chemistry coverage should be reduced, we then could increase coverage of biomedical journals that are relevant to more readers. Inevitably we can expect significant growth in such areas as neuroscience, immunology, pharmacology, and genetic engineering.

New Journal Selection

But all of this concerns journals we already cover. The main problem we face is how to select from the hundreds of new journals appearing every year. These choices are not easy. For this reason, ISI employs a staff of six full-time professional coverage specialists with backgrounds in the disciplines for which they evaluate journals. And they are supported by outside reviewers.

Critiques

In choosing journals, these specialists consider the solicited and unsolicited recommendations of subscribers, editorial board members, and others. If a journal has been published long enough to have accrued citations, we will examine the citation record. Even the impact may be deceiving if it is based on a few, recently published, high-impact articles.

For many new journals, we solicit critiques from people working in the disciplines covered in the journals. Of course, this has its pitfalls. If a new journal covers a specialized topic, are not the experts in that field likely to judge its coverage more important than journals in another field?

Individual Track Records

When evaluating new journals, we also look at the previously published works of the editorial board members and contributing authors. For example, we examine how often they have published; in which journals their articles have appeared; if their works have been cited; and we also check their reference lists to make sure the authors are citing a broad range of important journals. This ensures that the authors have consulted the literature and are members of a broad scientific community. Once a journal meets our criteria for editorial content, we must determine the depth of our present coverage of the field. If we already have sufficient in-depth coverage, we may have to determine if the new journal is of high enough quality to replace another publication in that discipline.

Geopolitical Representation

Another problem in journal selection is language. We do cover a large number of foreign-language journals. Here the presence of informative abstracts or summaries is essential. It is absurd for scientists in any country to expect colleagues abroad to be able to read all of the exotic languages in which original data can be reported.

Geographical representation is another consideration in adding foreign journals. Unless the journal is exceptional, we are not likely to cover a publication that would be of interest to only a small region of the world. As mentioned in an article on Third World research,¹³ we know that the best papers from most developing countries are published in international journals. So, given a choice of two journals in the same subject area, we will choose the one with international representation. This may present a hard-

ship to Third World publications trying to enter the international arena.

"LPU" Collections?

When reviewing new journals, we also try to determine if they are compilations of "least publishable units" (LPUs). This term describes the fragmentation ploy used by certain authors to maximize the number of papers published on a single project. I suspect that over the next decade we will witness a change in the character of many journals due to the proliferation of LPUs. Quite possibly, many LPUs will turn up in electronic databases, as the cost of printing and delivering printed journals forces editors to be even more selective. We must try to end the practice of evaluating scholars by counting their papers rather than assessing their papers' content.¹⁴ Administrators must be made conscious of the importance of high-impact articles and should discourage publication of LPUs. Editors should try to dispel the myth that the academic reward system values quantity over quality and refuse to publish obviously fragmented articles. In fact, electronic publication of LPUs should encourage the transformation of many journals into something more than mere collections of LPUs.

Publishers and Societies

Of course, subjective impressions may be part of your evaluation of a new journal. Indeed, one's personal experience with a particular professional society or publisher may suggest acceptance of any new journals they produce. Unfortunately, a good track record on old journals does not guarantee the performance of new journals. That is why we do not commit ourselves, in advance, to any journal. Surely, it is unlikely that a professional society will launch a new jour-

nal that will falter for lack of manuscripts. But it does happen.

And certainly we would expect reputable publishers to use their expertise to produce high-quality journals. But unfortunately many publishers, often at the prodding of special-interest groups, launch journals prematurely.

Furthermore, it is easy to believe that huge publishing organizations are monoliths with invariant publishing standards. But there is considerable variability in the quality and regularity of different divisions. The same may prove true for government-sponsored or -subsidized journals where the fate of journals may be subject to annual fluctuations in budgets.

By contrast, lack of previous experience should not by itself exclude anyone. There are always new publishers and societies trying to enter the publishing arena. Scientific and scholarly publishing is a very competitive business. We do everything reasonable to encourage new entrants, without lowering our standards. Some of the best journals were started by one individual dedicated to satisfying the needs of an identified audience. But it takes more than an impressive inaugural issue to make a journal viable and successful.

Format

Editorial content is our primary concern in journal selection. But since we are producing contents-page services and indexes, we must also consider whether a journal's format is amenable to our journal-processing procedures. Of course, high-impact journals will be covered regardless of format problems. But format considerations are important in choosing between those non-"core" journals that may or may not warrant coverage. We must consider whether a journal's contents page is photoreproducible, if the article titles are sufficient-

ly descriptive, and if the titles can be scanned easily. We also check the completeness of author addresses, since readers rely on our address directory for requesting reprints. Even if a journal meets our editorial and format criteria, we may delay its coverage until it does come out on a timely schedule.

Page Restrictions

ISI is trying to keep the costs of its services down. To do this, and produce a weekly publication that doesn't overload our readers, we establish restrictions each year on the number of pages each edition can include. But we can't abide by these rules by adding journals casually or aimlessly. So how is it that we still add journals that don't meet all of our selection criteria? That is the difference between human and artificial judgment. The journal that is perfect in all respects may be rare indeed.

A new journal should not be announced until it has an adequate backlog of manuscripts to accept subscriptions in good conscience. Librarians and scientists should demand that journals adhere to publication schedules or issue appropriate refunds. In the US, journals that do not conform to advertised frequencies may lose their second-class mailing privilege, which would hurt the readers and publishers alike. And if the journal cannot develop a backlog of manuscripts, the publisher should have the good sense to merge it with another, or admit that it is time to throw in the towel.

As a final note, if you are inspired or pushed into writing us about your favorite journal, remember that the pressure on *CC* is often misplaced. If that journal is chronically late, you should be protesting to the publisher and editor. However, I wish to stress that we desire informed opinions about the value of a

particular new journal. One letter signed by 20 readers is better than 20 letters repeating the same generalizations. But before you write us, ask the editor these questions: Is the journal on time? Does it have an adequate backlog of manuscripts? Was the "call for papers" announced in *CC* or anywhere else and how long ago? Is this journal really necessary?

If you plan to write us about covering a journal in *CC*, please make sure you send the journal's complete title and the publisher's name and address. Editors or publishers who are interested in having us cover a new journal should make sure we receive the most recent issue, subscription price, and publication schedule.

At this moment, there are dozens of new journals that we have evaluated and approved for coverage in one or more editions of *CC*. They are held in abeyance pending word from the publishers that the issues promised to subscribers will be forthcoming on a regular schedule. If you disagree with any of our policies, let us know. During the next year we are planning several conferences at ISI where these problems will be discussed extensively. The first, to be held in July, will cover problems of Third World journals. These questions are also regularly discussed at meetings of such organizations as the Council of Biology Editors, Society for Scholarly Publishing, and in particular the International Group of Scientific, Technical & Medical Publishers.

Serving the needs of the diverse audience of research scientists who read *CC* has always been a challenge. If we select a low-impact Soviet or Chinese journal in molecular biology rather than an equivalent journal in some other topic, it is because we believe that our readers want to gain an impression of research in those countries. If we cover a selection

of journals in the history and sociology of science, it is because we believe our readers are highly literate and want an occasional departure from pure laboratory information. And if we devote some small fraction of each issue to non-journal information, it is because you have convinced us that this is what you want. CC helps to make your job a little bit more pleasant and easier. By all means,

keep those letters coming, and be assured that we will seriously evaluate your suggestions.

* * * * *

My thanks to Stephanie Ardito-Quinzer, Helen Atkins, Joan Lipinsky Cochran, and Cecelia Fiscus for their help in the preparation of this essay.

©1985 ISI

REFERENCES

1. **Garfield E.** How do we select journals for *Current Contents?* *Essays of an information scientist.* Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1981. Vol. 4. p. 309-12.
(Reprinted from: *Current Contents* (45):5-8, 5 November 1979.)
2. -----, *To indent or not to indent? How to improve journal contents page formats.* *Ibid.* Vol. 3. p. 267-70. (Reprinted from: *Current Contents* (43):5-8, 24 October 1977.)
3. -----, What a difference an "A" makes. *Ibid.* Vol. 4. p. 208-15.
(Reprinted from: *Current Contents* (27):5-12, 2 July 1979.)
4. **Gordon M D.** How authors select journals: a test of the reward maximization model of submission behaviour. *Soc. Stud. Sci.* 14:27-43, 1984.
5. **Bart L.** *Oliver!* (Vocal score.) London/New York: Lakeview Music/TRO Hollis Music, 1960. 143 p.
6. **Koshland D E.** An editor's quest (II). *Science* 227(4684):249, 1985.
7. **Garfield E.** Letter to editor. (More on scientific journals.) *N. Engl. J. Med.* 307:506, 1982.
8. **Benjamin C G.** Soaring prices and sinking sales of science monographs. *Science* 183:282-4, 1974.
9. **Berry E M.** The evolution of scientific and medical journals. *N. Engl. J. Med.* 305:400-2, 1981.
10. **Garfield E.** False publication dates and other rip-offs. *Essays of an information scientist.* Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1980. Vol. 3. p. 488-91.
(Reprinted from: *Current Contents* (20):5-8, 15 May 1978.)
11. -----, Will advertising change *Current Contents?*—Yes and no. *Ibid.* Vol. 5. p. 335-6.
(Reprinted from: *Current Contents* (50):5-6, 14 December 1981.)
12. **Van Valen L M.** Letter to editor. (Page charge revolt?) *Nature* 308:490, 1984.
13. **Garfield E.** Mapping science in the Third World. *Sci. Publ. Policy* 10(3):112-27, 1983.
(Reprinted in: *Current Contents* (33):5-15, 15 August 1983 and (34):5-16, 22 August 1983.)
14. -----, How to use citation analysis for faculty evaluations, and when is it relevant?
Parts 1 & 2. *Essays of an information scientist.* Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1984. Vol. 6. p. 354-72.
(Reprinted from: *Current Contents* (44):5-13, 31 October 1983 and (45):5-14, 7 November 1983.)

Considerations in Selecting Journals for *Current Contents*[®]

Impact ranking by discipline	Refereeing
Editorial content	Abstracts/summaries
Subject relevance	Timeliness
Present coverage of field	Frequency
Geography	Addresses
Language	Contents page format
Citation practices	Least publishable units
Recommendations	Types of articles