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Guest Editorial

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Guest Editorial

The Paper Chase*

by Gabor B. Levy

There are some 100,000 scholarly journals into which hundreds of thousands of researchers pour their findings. There are hundreds of textbooks published yearly, and there are uncounted meetings and lectures. It is perhaps a foolhardy comment for an editor to make, but nobody can keep up even with a fraction of so much information.

Suburban commuters know the frustration of running after a train as it is pulling out of the station. No matter how fast you run, the ever accelerating train lengthens the distance. It is this sinking feeling I experience when reviewing scientific literature. Regardless of how diligently I read, and I gave up fiction years ago, I master a smaller percentage of existing knowledge each year. I knew more of what was knowable at 25 than I did at 40 years of age. By now, I feel utterly uneducated, as my speeding literary train fades into the distance. I am not alone, I see others on the plat-form with me just shrugging in resignation.

The resignation may be justified because the quality of the published material does not match its quantity. A recent study by Pendlebury of the Institute for Scientific Information (*Science* 250 1331-2 [Dec. 7, 1990]) caused a stir. He showed that about half of all publications go uncited, as if only the author and his mother had read it. The detailed numerical data on citations were widely discussed and disputed, but there seems to be a consensus that too much stuff, and too much of it trivial, gets published. This dispute was also useful in triggering thoughtful comments such as Peter Denning's wide-ranging editorial in the *Communications of the ACM* (Assoc. for Computing Machinery), entitled "Short Citedness" (in press).

As the avalanche of publications hurtles by, I am reduced to grazing or

nibbling in the opulent literary pasture. It is a bit frustrating, but there is also much fun in it. Today I found an article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (*N. Engl. J. Med.*) about an 88-year-old with normal blood cholesterol who consumes 25 eggs daily. Today's *Wall Street Journal* (*WSJ*) carried an article about fainting goats that keel over when frightened. This could be a lethal mutation because the creatures faint when a coyote nears, but the goats were protected and bred as bizarre pets. I find this trade in unfortunate mutants somewhat repulsive, but I was amused by the "grave concern" reported on the part of the Humane Society of the U.S. It seems to worry about stressing these creatures, at the same time when Iraq sorely stressed Kuwaitis, when we stressed Iraq considerably, and when the remaining Republican Guard stressed the Kurds. By comparison to the above, the scientific literature is benign and entertaining. Furthermore, you can learn important things as well. The same issue of *N. Engl. J. Med.*, besides reporting on the senescent egg-glutton, also carried a thoughtful review on cholesterol intake and serum levels, as well as a brief discussion on the meta-analysis of the data on mortality in cholesterol-reduction trials. The issue of the *WSJ* that humorously reported on the fainting goats, also carried a report on chemoprevention in women who are at risk for breast cancer, as well as a detailed story on concentrating x-rays by tapered fibers; a novel x-ray lens, as it were.

So by nibbling here and there, I can eventually find not only entertainment, but also the more important stories. I am sure to miss some, and may get much of it late, but there is so much redundancy and duplication, that I am bound to stumble on it sooner or later. The redundancy is inefficient, but a logical outcome of our present condition. Large population density, high

levels of industrial and scientific activity, and almost unlimited freedom are the marks of our Western Civilization. Such redundancy is inherent.

Nevertheless, some excesses could be curbed by modest and reasonable changes. Universities, which are the major paper mills, are starting to question the hallowed "publish or perish" doctrine. We should get out of the habit of asking for a "list of publications" in *curricula vitae*, and instead ask for the most significant paper (or no more than three). Then, instead of counting numbers, chances are that the reference would actually be read.

This attribution would be confounded however, if we continue today's habit of multiple authorship. Just glancing over the first quarter's index of *Science*, I find multiple authorships of half a dozen or more people in virtually every issue. An article in the March 15, 1991, issue is attributed to fully 18 authors. This may be a record. Another record of sorts is the authorship of 17, but in this case, all are from the same organization, which I found in the December 1990 issue of *Clinical Chemistry*. Being listed as an author does not seem to guarantee independent, original thought anymore, no more than a doctorate does nowadays.

The coinage has certainly been debased in this paper chase, but let it be! The only sure alternative would be censorship, and that is horrifying. It could even lead to me being an early target, and I want to continue writing my editorials.

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