

Manuscript Manglers Meet

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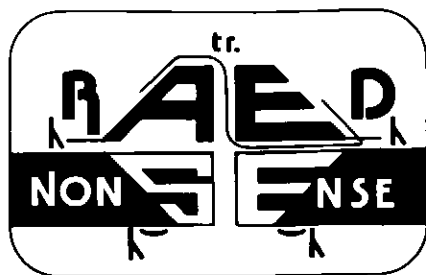
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Editors form one of the most maligned groups in the world ranking with drill sergeants, prison wardens and, of course, the R. C. Mounted Police. Little wonder that they occasionally seek solace in each other's company where they can air the frightening truths about authors and readers without fear of reprisal. One such opportunity is presented by the Association of Earth Science Editors who returned to Columbus, Ohio in October of 1977 for their 11th Annual Meeting. Chemical Abstracts Services played host as they did for the organizational meeting back in 1967.

The group was heterogeneous: amateurs and pros; high-priced production editors, volunteer selection editors, over-worked and underpaid copy editors; people from mining exploration and geotechnical consulting companies, from state and federal surveys and from scientific societies. Some of the sessions dealt with production problems - the price of paper, typographic styles and printing techniques; others dealt with selection and copy editing and included exchanges on refereeing systems and education of authors. We feel that at least some of the matters they

discussed could be of interest to the general reader, particularly if he or she is not also an author.

Science Journals For Fun Or Profit

A selection editor's workshop was chaired by the well-known sedimentologist and editor, *Gerald Friedman*. He reviewed questionnaires completed by many journal editors and found many of them had the same problems: most manuscripts submitted were too long, backlogs were accumulating, and increased publication costs made size increase impossible. Rejection rates seem to stabilize in time, e.g., the prestigious GSA Bulletin rejects only about 10 per cent of manuscripts because its standards are well known and authors don't take the time to send in their second-rate manuscripts. Effective in 1980, this Bulletin will have to restrict itself to two-page summary articles, with the full text only available on microfiche.

The fear is that more and more of the publication of geoscience will be taken over by the international commercial publishing houses who will continue to charge as much for their journals as library budgets can bear. Such publishers usually have no rigid limits on lengths of manuscripts and they cheerfully welcome the opportunity to devote whole issues to symposia so they attract some good papers. However, those who are now or were recently associated with such publications were unanimous in concluding that their standards are generally low. The international editorial boards never meet to discuss standards or refereeing procedures. Geoscientists at the meeting confessed that they sent their best papers to society sponsored journals and their second-rate efforts and pot boilers to the international commercially published journals. Those who have acted as referees stated that they exerted a much greater volunteer effort in peer review for a society than for a profit-making publishing house. We have a problem: high quality, low-priced, widely circulated, society sponsored journals are going belly up while lower quality, small circulation, high-priced commercial journals seem to be operating with tidy profits. Any suggestions?

Weight of a Blue Pencil

A panel on editorial excellence chaired by *John Heller* of USGS included three participants who took very different

positions on the degree or intensity of editing required. *Judy Holviak* AGU made the case for very light editing. Copy editing is labour intensive and a logical activity to cut when trying to restrict production costs. Most authors' manuscripts are intelligible especially as studies have shown that ¾ of readers are already partially familiar with the contents through oral presentations, etcetera. Also, most scientific papers are not meant to be classics but merely research reports of probable short-lived significance. She felt we should eliminate the middleman completely except in the case of completely unintelligible manuscripts.

Jean Thyfault of GSA objected strongly to this laissez-faire approach and made the case for a heavy blue pencil on all manuscripts. She pointed to crumbling standards in many aspects of life as we continuously relax rules and allow carelessness to flourish. Editors must help stem this tide by setting an example in the published products they present to readers of science. She felt that wherever possible the burden and expense should be shifted to sloppy authors, they are the ones who must be penalized if they don't submit clear, concise text and adequate illustrations.

Lucky Wendell Cochran of Geotimes was in the middle. He subscribes to rigorous editing in principle but experience with his news magazine has proved it is too costly, so he now opts for selective editing. Some authors get only a light touch to lend consistency to house style, others receive a fairly massive input to convert their prose into something readable.

Cochran's selective approach seemed to meet favour with most of those present. However, the three presentations combined to stimulate a wide variety of comments. For example *W. Ketterer* (USGS) stated that it is cheaper and more efficient to put the onus for an intelligible report on a capable \$12-15 K copy editor than on a \$30-40 K scientist. *Heller* (USGS) also felt that authors should not be asked to read proofs as they were not trained to do this, the process wasted time, and it often added expense as authors were tempted to make extensive changes to content even at this late stage. *Fred Spilhaus* of AGU claimed that these procedures could pamper an author to his eventual disadvantage - if he had to

suffer the embarrassment of his unedited prose and carelessly corrected proofs it might eventually goad him into learning and a little about reading and writing.

If there is merit in selective editing, then surely it must be worthwhile to teach science writing skills to potential and practicing geoscientists so that we can reduce the number of manuscripts that require partial or complete re-writing. This is already being done by the USGS which has an active in-house program underway and some of its editorial staff are also participating in college programs. Several other people, including some associated with private companies are also developing courses for their authors. We know of only two Canadian geology departments who are attempting such courses: University of Saskatchewan and University of Calgary. We would like to know of others as exchanges of experiences would be useful.

Some Capsule Comments

- When summarizing the attributes and failings of several well-known journals, *Gerry Friedman* singled out a newcomer, *Geoscience Canada*, for special praise. He said it is of first-rate international calibre, fills a very unique role as a topical review journal and through its recent extraordinarily good series on sedimentary facies is becoming a very widely known undergraduate teaching aid. There were many other nice things said about this new paragon among geoscientific journals, so many that one of us blushed and had to leave the room.
- Paper costs have risen 72 per cent in the last four years chiefly due to increase in labour costs according to *Jack Zanig* of the Bergstrom Paper Company. Glossy magazines with carefree advertisers will continue to meet the price rises. Scientific journals are going to have to be satisfied with lower quality paper.
- *Alan Young* of Edwards Bros. Printers analyzed the new super simple machines which supposedly allow your secretary to become an accomplished typesetter overnight. He proved it wasn't so. Further, he said that the best single way for a publication to save on printing charges is to insist that its authors send in good, clean, final copy.
- The professedly non-racist editor of a very large internationally known journal that shall remain unnamed mentioned that his British contributors consistently submitted the longest articles. They were also the national group most sensitive to any criticism of the style or substance or length of their reports.
- Remember how your old "Prof" emphasized the importance of a good comprehensive abstract? *Chemical Abstract Service*, a division of the American Chemical Society, has made quite a business out of turning poor abstracts into good ones. It abstracts and indexes almost ½ million papers and reports annually and employs 1100 people in its multimillion dollar super computerized headquarters at Columbus, Ohio. If you think GAC fees are high, you probably won't wish to subscribe to the abstract service at \$4500 per annum!
- One of us purchased 50 copies of the AGI's booklet *Geowriting* for students in a science writing class. This booklet, published in 1973, grew out of one of the Editor's meetings. It's a bright breezy, information-packed little gem that sells for \$3.00 and should be used by all your colleagues before they submit a report to the manager, to a client or (bless us) to an editor. You might even glance through it yourself sometime!
- Crumby syntax, jargon and abstruse English are not the only sources of "Noise" to disturb a reader according to *J. A. Carte* of the West Virginia Survey. Justified composition is harder on the reader than the ragged right edge (which we use in *Geoscience Canada*). Excessive use of capital letters, italic type and long lines of print are also discouraging to the people you hope will dote on your immortal words.
- The inimitable *Robert L. Bates* of the Geologic Column addressed the annual banquet. He felt the most important person in the chain was the reader and the reader needed and deserved careful editing, starting with a scrutiny of the title. The latest title in his fabulous collection is "How Well Logs Can be Misinterpreted".

Canadian Content

Geoscience Canada, the *Canadian Journal of Earth Sciences*, *Geos*, the Bedford Institute of Oceanography, the Alberta Research Council, the Ontario Department of Mines and the Institute of Sedimentary and Petroleum Geology were all represented at this Columbus meeting of earth science editors. Surprisingly, there was little representation from provincial surveys and none from mining and petroleum companies to match the large U. S. contingent from these spheres.

Stuart E. Jenness of Ottawa, publication supervisor of the NRC Journal of Research, was elected president of the Association of Earth Science Editors for 1978. He tells us that the 1980 meeting will be in Halifax and that he hopes to enlist many more Canadian blue pencils before that time.

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