

MEDICAL EDUCATION

Comments on European Association of Science Editors Conference

25/26 to 30 May 1985

Soria Moria, Voksenkollen, Oslo, Norway

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The location chosen is ideal: deep in the forest, practically cut-off from the rest of the world. The service is perfect. The group is relatively small. A situation purposely created (by the organisers) for close interaction and personal communication. Exchange of ideas at individual level was possible and in fact encouraged. A group identity was felt and in fact developed over the four days of the conference. You learnt to be humble and to talk softly. You developed an aversion for large gatherings. You felt that it was worthwhile to have travelled all this distance, and definitely you got your money's worth.

The conference started with an introduction to Norway: a boat tour of the numerous and splendid fjords of Norway in excellent sunny but cool weather, followed by a lunch consisting of the main varieties of Norwegian fish and finally a guided bus tour of Oslo: the beautiful Vigelands Park and the Viking Ships museum.

Editing in a different world.

Dr. Vincent A. Orinda of Kenya tells us that communicating health information to the lay public can be effective, even if the people cannot read and

write, provided that you have an enlightened medical body. Primarily with reference to communication methods, you need a centre to disseminate health information to the people. The tasks of this centre are as follows:

1. Collection of appropriate medical data.
2. Processing of health information.
3. Identification of modes of transmission - communication of health information to the public.
4. Co-ordination and efforts of all government and non-government organisations.
5. Evaluation of health information services. That's regular self-evaluation.

Klara Takařcsi-Nagy of Hungary re-emphasises what had echoed in the Cambridge conference (Sept. 1984) about the publication of scientific work: that there is a strong tendency to publish one's best work abroad, in a foreign language, usually English. The other problems of scientific editing in Hungary are not much different from the rest of Europe.

Helen van Houten of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), in Nairobi, Kenya started her talk with a brief introduction to Africa: wildlife, colourful festivals, national ceremonies, a land that is more than 90% agricultural and cities

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semi-crowded with professionals. The IDRC realised that in Africa, as in most if not all Third World countries, the results of research sat on a shelf in the form of a perfunctory report. Thus, it started a programme to train scientists, scholars and researchers in scientific editing. The training concentrated on small group workshops and field trips to the publishing houses. Ms. van Houten describes the frustrations, successes and aspirations of the training offered by the IDRC.

Paul Stapleton of the Indonesian Journal of Crop Science, Indonesia talks to us about the future needs of a Third World country. Paul is in Indonesia (he is Australian) to edit the Indonesian Journal of Crop Science, set up an accredited referring and peer system, educate and train his replacement in the fine details of editing scientific papers. Paul is not happy with the Western countries: scientific editors in the 'West' place an emphasis on format, style and convention that are poorly understood by the Indonesian scientists. The Indonesian scientist may not attend overseas conferences because of their poor command of English, and books/journals are beyond his/her reach because of the prohibitive costs of these publications. Paul suggests that work from the Third World presented for publication should not be turned down if it does not meet the standards established by scientific journals in the West. The editors of publications have a responsibility towards the work received from authors in the Third World countries: he/she should give the paper a maximum review time and offer suggestions to improve the work, with the multiple role of a resource person, a referee, an educator and a trainer. In addition, training schemes must be established in the Third World countries. Only then, one can say the the West has met its obligations towards improvement of scientific editing in the Third World.

A.J. van Loon of the Netherlands, on the problem of publication of conference papers, recommends re-writing the paper to meet editorial standards and then send it to a journal for publication, with a slightly different title to avoid problems with on-line searching.

Implications of modern technology.

John Reimertz of Norsk Data Computer systems, Norway, advocates routine use of computers in

editing. This is possible even with a background of minimal technical know-how. While John Mason of the same company suggests solutions to problems that may arise when an article or a journal is computer printed.

Martin Kahn of BRS/Saunders Colleague system, U.S.A. quotes Samuel Johnson's "Knowledge is of two kinds. Either we know it ourselves, or we know where to find it" to introduce the Colleague system of electronics retrieval, a sort of sophisticated Index Medicus that includes biographic, full text and integrated electronic information. Its use is demonstrated and the many advantages it offers are recalled.

A.D. Farr, of Medical Laboratory Sciences, Scotland, U.K. corrects some misconceptions about the word processor in his talk entitled "Writing with a word processor: some problems for the editor". It is not a computer, he tells us. It is a technical alternative to paper and ink with many limitations for scientific printing which are virtually non-existent with the typewriter. The price is relatively high, and systems are often incompatible. He suggests that E.A.S.E. undertakes a comprehensive study of electronic editing and come up with recommendations for its members.

The talk entitled "Word processors and typesetting in technical reporting: the solution of a research centre" given by Kerttu Tirronen of the Technical Research Centre of Finland is poorly presented and I get the impression that it offers nothing new or of interest except for those directly associated with the Centre.

Working with others - authors, other editors and referees.

L.E. Bottiger of Sweden describes how he meets the author - editor situations in his talk "The author - editor conflict: does it exist?" Conflict could arise "over the quality of the manuscript, over the scientific value, over ethical or statistical matters, over length and above all, over the acceptance or rejection of the manuscript". A workable philosophy that offers suggestions on how to improve the manuscript to make it publishable is the best way to minimise this conflict.

Paul Fogelberg of Finland describes the phases of development in co-operation between editors in the Scandinavian countries "from a situation with virtually no contact to a network of co-operation at European level" in his talk "Co-operation of science editors in Scandinavia; some developments".

In "Peering at peer review", Alfred Yankauer of the American Journal of Public Health, University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester, MA, U.S.A. details the history of a submitted article: accepted without modification, accepted after modification and rejected only to appear in another journal but after substantial revision or total re-writing; and thus concludes that peer review process performs an important and useful function.

John W. Glen of the Journal of Glaciology, Birmingham, U.K. has important messages for editors relating to "Working with referees". The referee must be an *expert* in the field of the paper. He/she must not be too closely associated with the work of the author, nor be a main scientific rival. He/she must be from a *different* locality/institution. Problems arising from abusive or unfair comments or when two eminent referees disagree are not uncommon and suggestions on how to deal with these problems were invited. The referee system does result in significant improvement in the majority of published papers.

Editorial Assessment and Statistics.

The group agreed that at least one of the in-house editors must have knowledge of applied statistics. "Statistically significant" is perhaps better

dropped in favour of confidence level and the strength of association: weak to substantial, rather than the p-value. Unfortunately guidelines in reference to the use of statistics are at present not possible, for inconsistencies/disagreements within the statisticians themselves still exist; but guidelines for authors using statistics is available from the British Medical Journal.

Layout and design.

A printed definition of layout and design was distributed to the group reading as follows:

Layout "... a rough sketch to show how a proposed arrangement of photographs and type will look in print..." (Webster: Encyclopedic Dictionary)

Design "...title, size of page, number of pages, printing process, distribution, frequency of issue, type of cover"
(Ferguson: Editing the small magazine)

The group agreed that the editors should not do what the author should have done and to leave the publisher's job to the publisher. It is better to start an article on the right hand page; the blank page can then be used for advertisements, notices etc. It is advisable not to use more than two columns in a page. Issues related to design concern primarily the editorial board while the publisher should deal with layout issues: typographical layout of covers and title pages, headings, subheadings, length of lines, placement/size of figures and captions and shock techniques.