

“CONFERENCE LITERATURE”

In an editorial published in *Biological Abstracts* 54(22): xiv, 1964 (November 15), the editors of that periodical announced their future policy of *not* abstracting individual papers from the proceedings of conferences, congresses, and symposia. Only a single descriptive abstract of the published proceedings will be given, except for certain selected conferences. Inasmuch as this decision of the abstracting service may discourage the excessive publication of conference proceedings, we wish to record our endorsement of BA's decision.

In our opinion, the main function of conferences is to bring workers with similar interests into personal contact. The delivery of many talks on related themes widens the vision of the auditors and enhances the value of each individual contribution. The great value of oral interchange during the succeeding discussion in clarifying old issues and raising new ones is well recognized. But we are opposed to the view apparently held in some quarters that the proceedings of a conference should, without further consideration, necessarily be published.

Let us consider first the advantages of publication. For certain conferences, the reader's convenience is indubitably served by collecting all the delivered papers into one volume. Conferences dealing with an entirely new field, or with an area of research in which workers from different disciplines meet together for the first time, are examples. Again, symposia may prove to be useful “refresher courses” for those of us involved in teaching subjects not central to our research interests. Sometimes, the regular publication of symposia may add prestige to the tradition of a Society; but at times this advantage may accrue only to the editor, the publisher, or the sponsors of the meeting.

The disadvantages are more numerous. First, there is needless duplication: almost all the worthwhile work presented at a conference has been or will be published elsewhere. Second, there is a drain on library and research funds that is out of all proportion to the return

in information: the titles of conference books often turn out to be more impressive than their contents, while the contents, already standing on the journal shelves in more satisfactory form, have an even shorter half-life than other scientific literature. Third, the threat of publication inhibits the presentation and discussion of really new work at a conference, the primary purpose of which may be to describe preliminary or incomplete work and to allow the imagination full scope during discussion periods. Since scientists are generally agreed that it is always inappropriate and usually harmful to publish unfinished work or ill-considered assertions, the conscientious participant in a conference may refrain from presenting data and ideas that could well be enlivening and thought-provoking when he knows that they are to be enshrined for all time on the printed page.

Our main objection to the publication of “conference literature,” however, is that the individual contributions are seldom subjected to critical review. The system of scientific publication that has emerged as the most satisfactory, and in which we strongly believe, is one in which every paper is subjected to critical evaluation by specialists in its subject matter. Too often, the proceedings of a conference are used as a vehicle for publication of unrefereed work. Even though there is no check whatever on its scientific quality, the fact that the work is published means that it can be cited by other authors as though it were on a par with journal articles which have been through the fire of informed criticism. The standard of scientific literature is inevitably lowered.

Unrefereed *abstracts*, which serve a different purpose, are of course not to be disparaged under this head. Nor does this criticism apply to symposia for which the customary refereeing system has been used. Unfortunately the reviewing process delays still further the notoriously slow publication of proceedings, so that the question again arises whether this form of publication is well-advised.

We do not mean to imply that articles submitted to a journal are uniformly of higher quality than contributions to a conference. But we do believe that the refereeing system provides a valuable control over scientific standards, and that scientific publication without its aid should as far as possible be avoided.

Because there are sometimes special advantages, as

outlined above, in publishing a conference as a whole, we do not suggest that the process should be abolished altogether. But we are opposed to conference publication becoming an established custom, for we believe that it is a custom with ill-defined purposes, prompted too often by commercial rather than scientific motives, and frequently harmful to the progress of science.

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