EDITORIAL

Managing the News

Many of us have inherited a respect bordering on reverence for the printed word, based on the realization that books are man’s most important source of knowledge. There used to be a limited volume of material available, permitting careful reading and thoughtful analysis of almost all the literature relevant to a problem. Two developments have changed this traditional approach. We are inundated with material and information, so that our only recourse is to develop speed techniques for extracting information from articles. Unfortunately, this usually means accepting the author’s conclusions with only cursory examination of the methodology and data provided. The second, more worrisome, development is that the complexity and sophistication of specialization has deprived us of common language: only a specialist can grasp the precise meanings of the jargon that his specialty adopts. A statement cannot be evaluated if there is inadequate understanding of the process by which it was reached.

Historical data that surface years after the event are often shocking, proving that the “insiders” decided what would be revealed, and even misrepresented facts. Manipulation of the news has been with us for a long time at many levels, from politicians and generals to editors and reporters. The recent revelation of dishonest journalism by a young reporter of the Washington Post, Janet Cooke, who earned a Pulitzer prize for it, strikes a responsive chord in all readers capable of critical analysis of the clinical and scientific literature. Ms. Cooke knew that such children and situations occurred, so she used a literary device (the composite person) to present an exaggerated but not totally inaccurate story. Many clinical and scientific writers know that the approach or technique they use is superior, and that their theories are logical and true. As Lewis Lapham noted in Harper’s, “a man’s perception of the universe depends on the intensity of his belief in that perception.” An author begins with an attitude and a mass of observations. The attitude often determines which observations will be emphasized, or may even determine which observations will be quietly dropped and not reported. This is not necessarily a deliberate attempt to deceive: rather it is a combination of conviction and ignorance of basic scientific criteria or research design. Sometimes the author’s concept of an adequate weight of evidence to support his theory is unacceptable to the reviewers, and the editor faces a dilemma.

Often the most interesting results that one hears of (via the grapevine) are never published in journals. The ratio of “proven failure” articles to “possible success” articles is extremely low. Granted we wish to move on to successful methods, but surely we should expunge the unsuccessful from the literature by publishing a retraction. Not to do so is certainly a form of news management.

How can the journal protect the reader? The review system employed by most reputable journals is the best method available, but it has its shortcomings, too numerous and obvious to dwell on. Should the reader be entitled to believe everything he reads in a well reviewed journal? If the protection of the reader is overzealous, this is a form of news management.

CPJ readers are frequently presented with material which is outside of their area of comprehension, although the implications of the findings and conclusions may be important to them. Creative thinking must be encouraged, and a valid approach must be presented but how to label it? How does the reviewer or editor indicate that the article is highly speculative or scientifically suspect and not necessarily accepted by others in the field? Publication is really an all-or-nothing matter. One avenue is the letter to the Editor if “experts” will agree to publicly disagree.

The point of this editorial is that, in the final analysis, you can be assured that this journal will have its share of misleading, inaccurate and out-and-out bad articles. It is the Editor’s responsibility to keep a modicum of control over this distressing situation. The Editor must publish articles, however, that he knows (?) are wrong, but cannot legitimately reject as they are presented. It is the reader’s responsibility to bring a healthy skepticism to every important concept, published anywhere.

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