

# CURRENT SCIENCE

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## EDITORIAL

### Scientific publishing in the Third World

An interesting paper recently produced by the Committee on Science and Technology in Developing Countries (COSTED) was entitled 'Scientific journal publishing in the developing world?'. Authored by Ana María Cetto of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, the article provides a perceptive analysis of the problems of Third World (a term Cetto largely avoids) journals with particular reference to Latin America. The question mark in the title is particularly provocative. Indeed, one might ask several pointed questions about scientific journals produced in the developing countries. Firstly, should they be produced at all? Secondly, are at least some of these journals relevant in a local context? Thirdly, can anything be done to improve the quality, visibility and international impact of journals from the developing countries? Cetto considers these issues and concludes on a positive note 'that there are strong reasons to promote and strengthen these journals by every means possible to enhance their quality, relevance, diffusion and visibility'. Many of the concerns voiced by Cetto will be strongly echoed in India. Indeed, her characterization of 'the Latin American landscape' as 'that of First World islands embedded in a Third World environment', would be an apt description of our own situation; very few institutions can access the vast body of scientific literature published in the world, both in printed form and through 'on line' electronic services, while for the majority local libraries provide a pitifully poor supply of journals, burdened as they are with increasing costs and diminishing budgets. Despite all the publicity, 'information superhighways' may not reach most of our scientific institutions and Universities for some time to come. In such a scenario the traditional printed journal, particularly if it is produced locally and economically, may still have a major role in the dissemination of scientific information in the poorer countries.

India is particularly fortunate in having a tradition of scientific publishing. Many of our journals have long, if

not distinguished, histories. This journal is a rare example of an inter-disciplinary publication in the Third World; indeed it is even more unusual in that its pages provide an opportunity for expression of opinions. Dissent and underdevelopment rarely coexist comfortably. In this context Cetto's comments on Latin American journals are relevant: 'Traditionally, in contrast to journals from developed countries, scientific journals in Latin America do not publish book reviews and very seldom do they publish letters to the editor; also the proportion of conference papers and proceedings is low. There does not seem to be any recognition on the part of the editors, of the need to offer a wider range of documents, that would perhaps make their journals more appealing to their readership?' Here, Cetto raises an important issue. Are many scientific journals which struggle to survive, more tuned to author's needs, with little regard for readers? This is particularly true in specialist journals where 'editors and authors belong to the same reduced circle'. Third World journals also suffer from limited circulation, ironically even in the countries of publication. This is partly because of deficiencies in promoting and distributing publications. Cetto quotes from the recommendations of a workshop on publications held at Guadalajara and charges editors with the responsibility of searching 'for new ways of financing, distribution, publicity and marketing, so as to ensure the sustainability and the necessary efficacy, both practical and in terms of knowledge of scientific journals'.

Reading Cetto's thoughtful essay, I could not but help reflecting on *Current Science*. There is pressing need to raise resources for this journal, increase circulation and to enhance both national and international visibility. The quality of the manuscripts published in many ways determines the future of the journal. The present contents of the journal provide a reflection of the nature of the manuscripts received. Some disciplines like the earth sciences and classical biology are over-represented. Others like physics, chemistry and molecular biology

are under-represented. A substantial part of the journal is indeed devoted to subjects that have a deeply rooted local origin – geology, ecology, agriculture, botany, zoology. This is inevitable. A more balanced coverage of disciplines is possible only if the community of scientists in India view the journal as a suitable medium of communication of at least some of their best results. The impact factor (however much one would like to ignore it) will rise only when authors cite their own work published in this journal, when they publish in the prestigious journals of the First World. Reference lists are a clear way of drawing attention to our own journals (and indeed our own papers).

*Current Science* also serves an important local function. It provides a forum for discussion of issues that concern the community of scientists in India. This medium is not always effective. Indeed, in recent times, the journal's silence on issues like the atomic explosions have evoked criticism. Nevertheless, there is every reason to hope that the pages of this journal will foster

healthy debate and that editorial policy will remain unaffected by external pressures. Enhancing the readership of this journal in India is indeed our primary objective. One can hardly expect that a journal that is unread in the country of its origin will be found interesting and useful elsewhere. We also intend to make every effort to enhance the international visibility of the journal. In this endeavour, the cooperation and help of almost the entire community of scientists in India will be necessary. Only then can *Current Science* provide a window through which the world can view science in India. In the years to come, scientific publishing (like science itself) is going to become a more competitive and difficult activity. Third World journals will undoubtedly face a very uncertain future. Cetto's scholarly analysis reminds us that we must all constantly evaluate our strategies for survival.

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