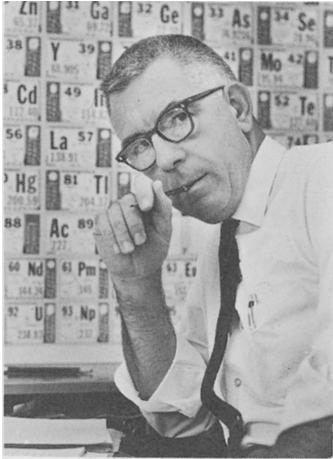




PROCEEDINGS — A SERVICE OR A DISSERVICE?



Last month, on this page, we decried the use and misuse of laboratory reports as a form of publication that is decidedly inferior to the open literature. We pointed out the disadvantages of this outlet and railed at the conscious or inadvertent simultaneous publication of identical information in both a laboratory report and a journal article.

Meanwhile, our attention has been called to another form of literature which is coming into prominence and which suffers much the same disadvantages as a laboratory report. This is the "Symposium Proceedings"—the collection of full-length papers given at a scientific meeting.

When only a few dozen copies are distributed to those attending a meeting, the Proceedings are, in our opinion, highly valuable in saving the attendee the trouble of taking copious notes on what was said and in providing him with copies of the slides used. However, when their distribution reaches a significant fraction (say 10%) of the circulation of a reputable journal that reports the same kind of material, then the Proceedings cease to be of benefit and begin to render the unsuspecting authors a disservice. This is because such widespread distribution may well preclude the acceptance of the material by a reputable journal on the grounds that republication is unnecessary and, in view of the publication explosion, unjustified.

The contention that an author is not as well served by publication in a Symposium Proceedings as in a journal implies the inferiority of the first as a means of publication. Our reasons for this position are numerous.

The "review" given a paper by a program committee for a meeting is more of an inspection than a real review. It tends to be highly superficial, because the large ratio of the number of manuscripts for consideration to the number of committee members and the time available makes the number of man-hours that can be devoted to each manuscript far less than what would be given by a journal.

Because of constant pressure for last-minute results and the short lead times that this pressure generates, little or no time is available to the authors to make revisions, even if any were suggested.

The differences in the types of reviews accorded a manuscript are not surprising because the purposes of the archival literature and of the scientific meeting are themselves so different. Journals (and books) aim at subject matter of importance, permanence, completeness, and high quality and a style that is concise and clear. On the other hand, program committees include considerations of program balance, absence of overlap with another speaker, and newness of data and often request or permit presentations that are only fragmentary progress reports or circumscribed reviews of the work of the author or of his organization. Moreover, far too many speakers try to read their material word for word, thereby achieving something that, although neither fish nor fowl, is often more foul than fish in that the verbal presentation is too stiff and rapid for audience comprehension, but the manuscript, when printed, is distractingly verbose and colloquial.

A powerful incentive that ensures high publication standards in journals (and books) is the effect that a good or bad issue will have on future subscriptions and sales. This incentive is usually absent in the publication of Proceedings, which usually lack continuity of subject matter or of staff from one meeting to the next. Even considering only a given volume, usually no one person has a large amount of responsibility for the contents; this invites a situation in which nobody's reputation suffers if a really poor set of Proceedings appears.

As with company reports, the lack of periodicity of most Symposium Proceedings means a lack of a forum in which the scientific community can refute or confirm the primary data reported, unless they do so in a different medium, which almost certainly will have a somewhat different audience. (Books generally require less refutation or confirmation of primary data contained in them because usually the author's contribution is one of interpretation and organization; in any case, books can be rebutted in book reviews, but Symposium Proceedings are difficult and rather unsatisfactory pieces to review.)

This lack of periodicity and frequent heterogeneity of content makes them difficult to catalog in a library and the information contained in them difficult to index and to retrieve.

Although sometimes extensive, the distribution given Proceedings is invariably less extensive than what would have been possible in journal article form or in a proper book.

Finally, it is time to admit the already well-known fact that Symposium Proceedings report what was given at the symposium, and such meetings always include papers that are known to the Program Committee to be inferior but which, nevertheless, have to be retained for a variety of reasons, which include international protocol, the fear of hurting the feelings of a friend or colleague, and considerations of a supposedly desirable balance according to geography or type of organization or competitor organizations within a given type. Even the dodge of publishing only invited papers and not the voluntarily contributed ones doesn't solve the problem, for not every person invited to present a paper can be counted on to write an excellent one every time, and the reasons that make program committees reluctant to reject contributed papers apply even more strongly in the case of a paper that has been invited; one is reluctant to request even a change in punctuation in a paper that would not have been written except that the author was asked to do so.

Those familiar with what are now called the Proceedings of the Conferences on Remote Systems Technology and with our own role in founding this series may wonder whether these comments represent an about-face. This is not the case. The RSTD Proceedings were, are, and presumably will be a special case. They are addressed to a very small group of highly specialized people who find that for their purposes a permanent record of a variety of construction details is valuable and who recognize that more often than not this material does not meet journal publishing standards. Moreover, wider distribution of such results is unnecessary and would not be particularly valuable.

We are well aware of suggestions that program committees be abolished and that any ANS member be allowed to present verbally anything he chooses at an ANS meeting. We hasten to point out that we have not come out either for or against such a proposal and that our discussion here is in no way concerned with what is presented verbally at a meeting but rather with what finds its way into print as a result of such presentation.

The reader who concurs in the above analysis and, as a result, decides that the next time he presents a paper verbally somewhere he will make sure to submit it to a reputable journal instead of allowing it to appear in the Proceedings of the meeting at which it is given may be in for a surprise because we have heard that some symposium arrangers have required inclusion in the Proceedings as a prerequisite to inclusion in the program. Fortunately, ANS members have several active groups such as the Program Committee and the Publications Committee through which they can express their opinions and their wishes.

Louis G. Stang, Jr.