



TWO ASPECTS OF A PUBLISHED PAPER



Perennial discussions by American Nuclear Society members concerned with the Society's publications often confuse two aspects of a published paper that have no bearing on each other. The first has to do with whether a given paper is a profound piece of quality research that has stood the test of a thorough rigorous review and therefore deserves to be placed in the archival literature as something authoritative. The second has to do with whether a given paper exists in print, available to most readers, and whether that paper establishes a date on which a statement was made or an idea recorded, or whether the paper says something in sufficient detail that subsequent reference to it eliminates the need to repeat the detail.

In the course of such discussions we have been asked more than once whether, in deciding the merits of a particular paper for publication, we would allow an author to cite a bibliographic reference to another paper that did not fulfill the criteria listed in the first category. Our answer to that is always "yes," provided, of course, that it does meet the requirements of the second category, namely, that it is somehow readily available to the average reader in visual form (e.g., printed or on microfilm) and that it fulfills a useful function. In fact, we submit that this second category is the only one with which an editor can or should be concerned when considering what references to allow.

If an author wants to quote from a document whose content is trivial or if he wishes to cite a paper in a journal that has a reputation for inaccurate or careless statements, to some extent this will reflect adversely on the paper in question, particularly if there are many such references. As a result of things like this, reviewers may get a bad impression of the paper under consideration, and, based on their advice, an editor may reject the entire paper.

However, we doubt that any editor would refuse to allow an author to cite a particular reference in an otherwise good paper, if his reason for refusal were based on the presumption that the cited publication failed to meet the same standards of quality that his own journal meets. To do otherwise would mean that he would have to review each individual reference or at least keep a black list of unacceptable citations. Both tasks are hopeless, and neither constitutes an appropriate function of an editor.

Instead, if an editor doubts the value of a particular reference he is more likely to ask his librarian "Can you locate that reference, and how available is it?" The reason for this is found in considering the reason for citing a reference at all. Whether the reference is intended to establish a prior date or whether it is intended to provide fuller detail or additional background, it is of no value unless it is readily available to the reader. If it is available only with much difficulty or not at all it might as well be listed as a "private communication"—a device that serves simply to pass the buck to someone other than the author, with whom the reader would have to communicate for further information on the subject.

The fact that there is considerable misunderstanding on this point is evidenced by the frequency with which references are cited to oral presentations of papers given at meetings. Such citations are worthless unless the reader happened to be present at the meeting and is blessed with total recall or unless he just happens to know that the papers at that meeting were published and by whom and under what title.

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