

Too many chemistry journals*

SIR: We are writing to communicate to our colleagues our joint concern over the recent proliferation of journals in chemistry.

We shall not discuss the overall growth in the number of papers published. That is another matter. We are concerned here with the quality of the literature, its cost to the libraries of our institutions, and how publication is organized.

1) Today a publisher can start a journal in almost any part of chemistry and, by charging a high subscription price, can apparently make a profit, relying only on sale to libraries. The libraries are a captive market. They have assumed that they must buy every journal published irrespective of its overall quality.

2) The new journals generally do not require publication charges from the authors, but subsist on the high subscription prices. In some countries the result of increased publication in these journals is a general shift of the burden of supporting publication from the government agencies (which generally pay the researchers' publication charges) to universities (which support the libraries). In other countries money, which the universities could otherwise use for research, goes to meet the blownup library costs. The budgets of university library systems are overburdened. Several libraries have had to institute a freeze on the ordering of new

journals and discontinue subscriptions to old journals.

3) We believe that lax refereeing standards are characteristic of some new commercial journals. Such journals necessarily have a vested interest in building up volume to maintain themselves. The quality of new journals needs to be compared carefully with the standards set by other established journals.

4) The compartmentalization of chemistry into more and more specialized sections encourages these new journals and is encouraged by them. Communication among specialists in any one field is thereby facilitated. But our general feeling is that the literature should be so constructed as to deter trends towards overspecialization, and should foster communication among chemists working in different areas.

There exists also an economic side to overspecialization, aptly expressed by L. C. Cross in the May 1973 issue of *Chemistry in Britain*: "Some have tried to find the answer in greater specialization, dividing new knowledge haphazardly into more and more packages of increasingly narrow interest and smaller distributions. This has merely resulted in ever-multiplying costs to the consumer and greater profits to the producer. Such results are inevitable because the package is not being altered fundamentally, only the label is being changed, with results that any housewife would predict."

Positive action on the problem of journal proliferation is difficult to take. But we feel that the situation is sufficiently critical that such action must be

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undertaken. Accordingly we suggest the following:

- That all scientists urge their libraries to exercise the greatest reticence on subscription to new commercial journals. We realize that such a boycott of new literature will lead to some hardship; and some scientific information may take longer to get through. But we feel that there is no quicker way than this to convince publishers.

- That all scientists refrain from publishing in new commercial journals. We realize in asking this that financial support for page charges levied by some national journals is not available to all, and that some journals deplorably have imposed penalties, in the form of delay, for nonpayment of page charges. But there are, in all fields, established journals which do not impose page charges.

- Ideally, some international agency ought to be constructed for examining and assessing the foundation of new journals. At the present time this is probably an unrealistic thought. National chemical societies are not perfect, and indeed have sometimes resisted the formation of badly needed supranational journals. They should, however, be urged to set up an impartial mechanism for evaluating the need for a new journal and require that criteria for assuring the level of quality are met. A set of criteria for refereeing practice, statistics concerning rejection rates, criteria for terminating a journal,

restrictions on language or national origin of work, page charges, etc., would be the proper concern of any committee.

Finally, we turn to the problem of our colleagues who staff the editorial boards and advisory committees of new commercial journals. We doubt that many of them have tried seriously to convince their respective national chemical societies to establish new journals where need clearly existed. Some have, we think, instead, taken an easy, but ultimately detrimental path of succumbing to a publisher's enticements. Membership on an editorial board has always been universally accepted as an indication of scientific expertise and sound judgment. We should like to keep it that way.

We would welcome discussion on these matters. For our own part we are of the opinion that the only way of preventing the publication of these unnecessary journals is to discourage their purchase by our libraries. We also feel that such action is needed quickly.

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