Comment: Errors Galore

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In 1978, I authored a book, *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method* (Dillman 1978). According to the ISI Citation Indexes, it has now been cited in the scientific literature approximately 4,000 times. When reviewing a summary of its citations, I discovered citations showing publication dates in 24 different years, including 1907 (once) and 1908 (three times). Citations erroneously listed it as having been published in all but three of the years between 1971 and 1995; there were 102 such citations. In addition, 10 citations showed it as having been published in 1999 or 2000. I attribute the latter two years to authors who intended to cite the second edition—although I had changed the title to *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method* (Dillman 2000).

I discovered 29 different titles for the book, including mail descriptors such as *main, mall, mial, mailed,* and *mailback.* The telephone descriptor also had creative spellings; they included *telephon, teleophone, telephones, telephone,* and *elephone.* Not surprisingly, my name was also frequently misspelled as Dillon, Dilman, Dill, and probably others than I was unable to find. I also discovered that I had been given many new middle initials. A similar pattern of inaccuracies has also emerged with the second edition of the book.

When a friend introduced me to the Social Science Citation Index in the late 1980s, I thought it would be useful to track citations of the book as a way of learning about its impact on research by other authors. My intent was to collect new ideas for incorporation into the second edition. To accomplish that, I asked a graduate student to take the list of citations for a recent year to the University library and copy every article he could find that cited my book.

When I began to review the large stack of articles he placed on my desk, I became dismayed quickly. Most of the citations were perfunctory, e.g., "I used the TDM (or Dillman) method to collect data." The TDM that I had developed and methodically tested involved simultaneously focusing on all aspects of survey design that seemed likely to influence response rates and quality. Specific features of the TDM ranged from number and timing of contacts and details of questionnaire design to the personalization of all communications and use of stamped return envelopes. Examination of the survey procedures that the citing authors used revealed that they often bore little resemblance to the TDM procedures I had described in the book. I concluded that, in some instances, it was unlikely the authors had read the book. After spending a few hours looking at the results of this preliminary foray through the literature, I decided to discontinue the effort and reassign the research assistant to other work. As a consequence of this exercise in frustration, I also developed considerable skepticism toward citation counts in the annual review process as a way of evaluating the actual impact of an author's work.

Wright and Armstrong are right! There is a substantial citation problem, which must be corrected. As Wright and Armstrong emphasize, the problem includes inaccurate use of procedures described in the publication being cited. In addition, errors in citations are also disconcerting, although in some cases they may be humorous, e.g., I was cited as authoring a book written 34 years before I was born! Their paper caused me to reflect on why journals emphasize the use of citations so heavily and also on the process for generating such citations.

Sometimes, an author adds citations to help the reader find literature that is relevant to a research problem; there is no intent to use the particular procedure that the authors being cited advocate. In other cases, such as the use that Wright and Armstrong focus on, authors ostensibly, but often inaccurately, use citations to describe their own work. Or, they add citations because editors and reviewers ask for them and these aspiring authors look for a path of least resistance to successful publication. In addition, editors often assign page limits to rewritten papers. Sometimes, this restriction encourages the addition of certain citations to eliminate detailed descriptions in a paper judged too long. In other cases, it leads to

the deletion of relevant citations to meet the obligatory page limits. In addition, authors may cite papers (particularly their own and those of colleagues) gratuitously to draw attention to this work. The reasons for citations to a particular work vary greatly.

Wright and Armstrong have reported an interesting case study. They showed that virtually all of a sample of 50 articles that cite a much-referenced paper by Armstrong and Overton (1977) failed to adhere to the procedures that the paper recommended for estimating nonresponse bias. It is not clear to me why the authors cited the A&O paper, whether they intended to estimate nonresponse bias, even whether the procedure was relevant to their study findings. I suspect authors and editors could disagree on the importance of doing so. Nonetheless, the analysis does suggest that there can be a huge discrepancy between citing an article and the impact that citing has on author decisions.

Wright and Armstrong propose that whenever an author uses prior research to support a finding, that author should attempt to contact the original authors to ensure that the citation is properly used. My initial reaction is that I hope this does not happen. I do not relish the thought of having authors ask (and expect) me to spend time responding individually to questions about whether they have cited my work correctly, especially because the objectives of articles and citations vary tremendously. Sometimes, nonresponse bias may be central to an analysis; in other instances, it may be tangential to the hypothesis being tested. I can envision such blanket requests evolving into sidebar debates between author and editor about what constitutes proper citation and proper use of other people's work. I would prefer to leave that activity to the editorial process, which often handles it by sending papers for review to authors who are cited on the issues most central to the paper.

Nonetheless, Wright and Armstrong have written a valuable paper. It brings attention to the problem of gratuitous and inaccurate citations that should not be part of scientific writing. The problem has many dimensions, only a few of which the authors develop in this paper. However, I hope its publication will heighten wider awareness of these potential problems and stimulate more work on finding solutions. I also hope this paper causes authors and editors to be more vigilant about citations and how their use supports the writing process.

Meantime, this author has already vowed to check his submitted papers once more for relevance to each cited paper and reasons for the citation. He will also check spellings and ensure that he is not citing another author for having written a paper several decades before he was born.

References

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Comment: Omission and Redundancy in the Use of Citations

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Omitted Citations

Wright and Armstrong claim that "authors often overlook relevant research." I share their concern. One reason is that people search for evidence only within their own discipline. As a geographical scientist now working in marketing and management, this is particularly apparent to me in areas such as diffusion research. It is curious how marketers with an interest in the diffusion of ideas and products make few direct references to work published in epidemiology or geographical