Information-Reporting Services*

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INFORMATION-REPORTING SERVICES

Information-reporting services are a media of communication which is decidedly different from the journals and magazines described in this symposium by Messrs. Kenyon and Hader.

An information-reporting service is a publication which is distinguished by two very definite characteristics:

1. It is directed toward a relatively small group of people in a very specialized area of business of industry. By small I mean perhaps as few as 500 subscribers.

2. It contains no advertising—only editorial matter. This means that the publication depends entirely on paid subscriptions for its revenue.

Together, these two characteristics usually dictate a subscription price which is relatively high by normal periodical standards.

Information-reporting services are not particularly new. I have made no study of their history, but one of the oldest—and probably the best known one in business—is the Dow Jones financial news service, started in 1882. The Dow Jones service originally consisted of news bulletins hand written on tissue paper and delivered by messenger at intervals throughout the day to clients in the New York financial district. Another well-established service is Platt's Oilgram, which began publishing a daily price-reporting service for the petroleum industry in 1924, and a daily news service in 1934. These have since been published continuously.

Although not new, information-reporting services are today becoming newly recognized as a valuable means of disseminating information, one which can help to satisfy our unquenchable thirst to find out what is happening.

In some respects, an information-reporting service may be thought of as a cross between a technical or business book, on the one hand, and a magazine or newspaper, on the other. It is a publication which combines some of the advantages of each.

Like many books, the information-reporting service is highly specialized. It is usually devoted to a specific subject and does a thorough job of covering it. Like a book, it is strictly editorial in content, and carries no advertising. Like a book, it has a rather limited audience—500 to 1,000 in a field where a magazine might have a circulation of 25,000 to 50,000. Like a book, it commands a premium price, *e.g.*, $100 a year for a weekly service in contrast to $5 for an annual subscription to a magazine, or $300 a year for a daily service in contrast to $25 for a daily newspaper.

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But books take considerable publication time, become out-of-date quickly, and are used more as texts and references than as sources of new information. These are areas where the magazine or newspaper is superior.

Like the magazine or newspaper, an information-reporting service is published periodically and quickly. It usually comes out daily or weekly. Like the magazine or newspaper, its content is fresh and up-to-date. It reports current news currently.

Types of Information-Reporting Services. There are three different types of such services: the news service, the newsletter, and the news digest. Each is distinctive in its own right.

The *news service* is characterized by the fact that it reports what is currently going on in whatever field it covers.

It gathers its information from primary sources of news—the companies and people who are actively engaged in its field. It does not pick up what has already been published in other media.

Another characteristic of the news service is that it does not interpret or editorialize. It reports facts only, on the basis that its readers, mostly top-executive and management people in the field, are fully competent to interpret the significance and meaning of these facts as they apply to their own operations. Practically everything reported in its pages is either a fact or an opinion or comment attributed to a specific and identified source.

Obviously, there has to be some interpretation on the part of the editor of any news service. He exercises his judgement—or interprets, if you wish—when he decides what news to report and what to leave out as not being significant. He also exercises judgement, to some extent, when he decides which stories will go on page one and which will be at the top of a page.

The *newsletter*, on the other hand, generally does an interpretive reporting job. It usually reports current news only in capsule or headline style, with the opinions of the editor added in a liberal fashion.

The newsletter will print rumor and scuttlebutt—the type of information generally passed by word of mouth. Such information can be of great value—if read with a couple of good-sized grains of salt, and with an understanding that a statement might be true or false, or anywhere in between.

A newsletter might be likened to the editorials and signed opinion columns of a daily newspaper, whereas the news service is more like the straight news columns.

The *news digest*, as its name implies, is a digest of information which has already been published in the current literature. Many of these are internal publications,

put together once a week, for example, by some assigned group in a large company which will read several dozen daily and weekly periodicals, select those items considered of interest to the company's operations, and write up a series of brief, one-paragraph digests or abstracts of the pertinent points. Such a publication is circulated to management and operating personnel within the company, and is intended to save them the chore of reading the same group of periodicals while at the same time alerting them to what is going on.

A news digest does not give many details on a particular point, but it tells it readers where they can find them in the current literature. Its reporting is somewhat slower than a news service, since it has to wait for news to be reported in another periodical before it can digest it.

Advantages. Information-reporting services offer their readers a number of advantages.

For one thing, they are usually quite *speedy* in getting information to subscribers. It is not uncommon for a daily news service to have a copy deadline of 5 P.M. and to place an issue in its subscribers' hands in the first mail delivery the following morning. This speed is possible because of the method of printing employed, the small number of copies printed, and the fact that an issue is light enough to be sent *via* first class mail, or even air mail, without excessive cost.

A second advantage is that an information-reporting service is usually written and edited for *fast reading*. An adroit editor in this field uses short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs. He avoids fancy prose and "cute" writing, and gets right to the point. He cuts out excess verbiage and unimportant details. He keeps background data to a minimum. He writes headlines to tell a specific story of who is doing what.

The reader of an information-reporting service can skim through an issue in perhaps as few as five minutes and still be certain that he has been alerted to anything of significance that has happened in his field since the last issue. He can go through an issue this quickly because everything is directly in front of him, he doesn't have to turn page after page to find the next story, he does not have to look carefully to avoid missing a small item buried at the bottom of the page, and he is not faced with extraneous material to detour his attention.

If he wants to read every word in the issue, it may take him 15 or 20 minutes, depending on the issue size and his reading speed.

A third advantage is *completeness*. Most magazines and newspapers have a specific amount of space to fill with editorial material in each issue, the amount being determined in part by the printing methods used and the quantity of advertising in that issue.

On the other hand, an information-reporting service—particularly a news service—is flexible. The type of printing process used and the relatively small circulation usually mean that adding an extra page or more to an issue to accomodate an extra heavy flow of news is not expensive. Everything available in the way of worthwhile news for an issue can be reported in that issue. Stories do not have to be killed or details left out because there was not enough space in that issue.

This same flexibility has a reverse advantage. Among conventional magazine and newspaper publishers there seems to be a tradition that a printed page has to be full, that you can not quit writing when you have said what has to be said if that would mean leaving a page half empty. Some news services, however, do not hesitate to publish an issue which has the last page blank or only half full. The space could probably have been filled, but only by padding it with fillers and using material which in the editor's best judgement really was not worth his readers' time.

Disadvantages. The primary disadvantage that information-reporting services have is their high cost. As previously pointed out, they are relatively high priced because they carry no advertising, depend entirely on subscription revenue, and have a somewhat limited market.

In the petroleum and chemical fields, for example, one daily news service sells for $300 a year, another for $250. My own weekly news service sells for $85. A weekly newsletter in the international field sells for $365.

Some of the more limiting aspects of most information-reporting services are their lack of technical content and their limited ability to report great amounts of detail on a new development.

These disadvantages do not necessarily conflict with my earlier statement that one of the advantages of an information-reporting service is its completeness of coverage. A publication can be complete in that its touches all bases and reports on all happenings of significance without going into great detail on every event. For instance, if Esso Research were to announce a new cracking catalyst, we would report that development and tell in broad terms what it was claimed this catalyst could do that was unusual or different, but we wouldn't carry detailed tabulations of the results of various pilot-plant tests or of results under various operating conditions.

We could do so, of course, but if we were to we would lose one of our primary advantages—conciseness. Such reporting is best left to the technical magazine, which can do it more economically and on a broader basis, although at a slower pace.

Editing and Publishing. The question which I am most frequently asked is: "Where do you get your information?" There is no great secret about this, although each of the three types of services uses different resources.

In any event, the first requirement is an intimate knowledge of the field being served. Just as a good salesman knows his product, so also the good editor knows his field. This is knowledge which you can not learn in any classroom; it comes only from experience.

A news service is probably the hardest to put together, both because you are working against a deadline and because your reporting has to be completely accurate. A news service gathers its news from three basic sources:

1. It depends to a large extent on its own staff's reporting of current events—talking with people, following up on something that was reported in an earlier stage some months ago, and tracking down leads. This is plainly and simply leg work—good newspaper reporting.

2. Another prime source is its correspondents in the field, people who are generally located in major business and industrial centers. These individuals keep their eyes and ears open for local events in the publication's field and report on anything they learn about.

3. A third source is the flood of press releases and similar announcements sent out by some companies when they have something to say. Some firms, however, do not always announce everything that they are doing, and you can report their activities only by knowing some responsible person in the organization with whom you can check periodically.

Much of our reporting is done by long-distance telephone. One afternoon recently I talked with news sources in Washington; Philadelphia; Houston; El Paso and Odessa, Texas; Bartlesville; Calgary; San Francisco; Denver; Cleveland; and Yazoo City, Miss.

A newsletter depends on many of the same sources, to some extent, but more importantly it counts on the acquaintance its staff has in the industry it serves.

A news digest probably has the easiest job of gathering information. It has only to subscribe to the publications in the field it serves, and let them be delivered. Its problem, however, is to cull all the pertinent information and at the same time avoid duplication. As anyone who reads various journals regularly knows full well, it is not uncommon for one to report as a brand new development, this week, something which is only a further step in a project which was first reported three months ago.

I have referred to the printing methods used by information-reporting services as being economical and fast. Most of these publications are printed offset or multilith from typewritten copy. They generally avoid metal type-setting and letterpress printing. A few are mimeographed. Page size is usually 8½ by 11 inches. Right-hand margins are seldom justified, that is, made even, as is usually done in type-set magazines and newspapers. This method of printing is one reason why information-reporting services can be so speedy. Typing on a sheet of paper is faster than setting metal type.

In our own case it is not uncommon for us to receive the last story for an issue by long distance at 5 P.M. Friday, edit and type the story directly onto a page for reproduction, send the page to our printer, and have finished copies of the complete issue back in our hands ready to fold and mail by 5:45 or 6 P.M.

We mail all copies first class. Since we mail Friday evening, most copies will be delivered by ordinary mail in the first delivery on the following Monday. To those areas that are too far or too isolated to be assured of surface delivery over the weekend, we use air mail (at no extra charge to subscribers in the United States, Canada, or Mexico).

Problems. All is not peaches and cream in this business, however. I trust I have not painted such a rosy picture that anyone with an idea and some knowledge of his field will rush out to set up his own publishing venture.

One problem is the limited market for any such publication—probably 500 to 1,000 subscribers, on the average. A publication of the sort I am discussing here, if it is going to be successful, has to be limited to a fairly distinct area of business or industry, one in which you can specialize and concentrate. By the very fact of your having circumscribed a restricted field, the audience to which you can appeal is limited.

On the other hand, if you broaden your field to enlarge your audience you immediately lose the original appeal of concentration. To serve the larger audience, you must include material which is not of interest to your original audience. You dilute your service and make it less valuable to the original readers.

An even more serious problem besets most information-reporting services. It has put some out of business, and it threatens the continued existence of others. This problem is unauthorized reproduction. With modern photocopying and electrostatic copying machines, it is simple, quick, and inexpensive to reproduce printed pages right in your own office. The resulting copies are clear and legible.

No one would think, of course, of subscribing to one copy of *Chemical Week* and then running it through his Xerox machine to make a dozen extra copies for other people in the company. Although copying might cost only a few cents a page, it's much cheaper in this case to pay $36 a year for an extra dozen subscriptions. However, when you start looking at an information-reporting service running only 5 or 6 pages an issue and costing maybe $300 a year, then the temptation to buy one subscription and make 12 extra copies for further distribution becomes quite real.

The publisher can cope with this problem in several ways.

1. He can copyright his publication. Copying or otherwise reproducing all or any substantial portion of a copyrighted publication is illegal. A copyright notice on a publication will of itself deter some law-abiding firms or persons from making copies to avoid buying extra subscriptions. If it doesn't however, then you are faced with the additional problem of first obtaining evidence that a company is making unauthorized copies, and then prosecuting. But prosecution is expensive. Also, some publishers are reluctant to prosecute because of the adverse effect such action might have on their other business interests.

2. The publisher can establish a pricing structure which sets a much higher price for the first subscription going to a company, then reduce the price considerably for additional subscriptions. While this solution reduces the incentive to reproduce copies, it has the disadvantage of discriminating against the small company which needs only a single subscription, and of possibly discouraging some potential subscribers from making that initial expensive plunge.

3. The publisher can appeal to the basic honesty and integrity of a business firm, and hope that its management has some moral stamina. This approach has worked, but it requires adroit handling at the top level. It is not easy to go to the president of a major company to tell him that he is not playing the game fair and square. I understand, that at least one major company has established a policy which says that it will not reproduce any periodical to avoid entering additional subscriptions.

4. The solution I really like best of all is to print either on a special paper or with a special ink which makes reproduction difficult or impossible. Such a technique could be quite effective ten years ago, when the Thermofax was the most common office-copying machine. Early Thermofax machines depended on the carbon content in the printed image being copied to yield a legible reproduction. This was usually no problem, because most printing is done with black ink that contains a carbon-black pigment. I well remember the consternation caused among some subscribers to one particular news service when it started

printing with a special ink that it had formulated. The printing looked almost black, but it was actually a very deep brown, and had no carbon in the pigment. However, the Xerox and other newer machines—fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it—don't have this limitation.

In summary, information-reporting services can be a valuable source of current information in a particular area of business or industry. They are most useful to busy executives and managers who do not have the time to wade through the steady flow of newspapers and magazines, but who need to be right on top of current developments.

Reviews of the Chemical Literature*

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The utility of a review depends on what one expects of it. If it is to keep up with developments in one's own field, a review might not be sufficiently timely. For such a need, one might better write the review. That way one would be forced to keep in close touch with the journals that are the prime sources of review material.

Is it to keep in touch with neighboring fields? Is it to brush up on a new field to prepare for an assignment? If these are the needs, reviews will help.

THE NEED FOR CRITICAL REVIEWS

There has been much discussion in recent years that more and better critical reviews are needed to keep chemists abreast of the flow of new information on subjects where they cannot cope with the flood of original papers. Adams has asserted that the review is the practical solution to the critical problem of "keeping up with the literature," in that it "represents the first effort to synthesize newly reported information and to relate it to the cumulated knowledge of a research field" (*1*). Weinberg has pointed out the importance of "the job of sifting, reviewing, and synthesizing information—that is, handling information with sophistication and meaning, not merely mechanically" (*12*). And Weil has gone even further to assert that "an increasing number of companies have, in the past decade, recognized that they must use some of their best senior scientists and engineers" (*11*) to do this job. Good reviews will serve an alerting function that can help these scientists do their job better and more quickly.

Two studies on how research workers find information have credited reviews as the source for 4% of the "finds" (*3, 6*). In another study on information gathering habits, 25% of the medical scientists surveyed quoted review papers among their primary tools.

Fix, Campbell, and Creager have estimated that approximately 8,700 review articles in chemistry were published in 1962 (*4*). This estimate is based on the review articles covered by *Chemical Abstracts* in which the number of reviews (about 6%) increased faster than the total number of articles over the five-year period through 1962.

Distribution of review articles among types of literature has been estimated as: 55% in primary research journals, 38% in serial review publications, and 7% in annuals or other special types of publication (*4*).

Bruning has discussed the desirability of confining reviews to review journals in contrast to interspersing reviews among reports of original work (*2*). Research journals as a source of reviews are disregarded in the present study. Among the remaining literature, there are three principal types that accomodate reviews: review journals, serial review books, and proceedings.

REVIEW JOURNALS

There are four principal review journals in chemistry in the English language. They are: *Chemical Reviews*, published by the American Chemical Society; *Quarterly Reviews*, published by the Chemical Society (London); *Review of Pure and Applied Chemistry*, published by the Royal Australian Chemical Institute; and *Uspekhi Khimii*, translated as *Russian Chemical Reviews* by Cleaver-Hume Press for the Chemical Society (London).

In addition to these there are several review journals in English in allied fields that carry certain amounts of chemical material. They are: *Atomic Energy Review*, published by the International Atomic Energy Agency (Vienna); *Bacteriological Reviews*, published by the Society of American Bacteriologists; *Biological Reviews* of the Cambridge Philosophical Society; *Botanical Review*, published by the New York Botanical Garden; *Metallurgical Reviews*, published by the Institute of Metals (London); *Pharmacological Reviews*, published by Williams and Wilkins for the American Society for Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics; *Physiological Review*, published by the American Physiological Society; *Reviews of*

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