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Pitfalls of Prepublication

In recent years a new kind of informal publication has come to play an important part in the dissemination of scientific information: many scientists now follow the practice of mimeographing their articles and sending copies to selected colleagues prior to official publication. This practice has the great advantage of speed: the results are available to some of those concerned within days rather than within months, and the research process is correspondingly accelerated.

This is all to the good, but there are some disadvantages. For one thing, those researchers who are not on the list to receive the informal or fugitive publications are left in the dark about the latest developments unless and until regular publication occurs.

For another, there is the possibility of vexatious bibliographic confusion. This creates no problem when the mimeographed papers are already accepted for publication at the time of distribution. But a good many papers of this type are sent out with the notation that they have been or will be submitted to a certain journal. Here is a source of possible confusion, for, as most authors know, the relation between a manuscript and its appearance in print is analogous to that expressed in the proverb, "Many's the slip 'twixt the cup and the lip." The paper may be submitted and withdrawn, or submitted and rejected, or not submitted at all.

Thus, even though the paper may never be published, writers of other papers may list it in their bibliographies as "in press" in a certain journal, and the editor may be asked when such-and-such a paper is going to be published or even, "Why are you suppressing so-and-so's paper?"

What are some possible remedies? To lessen bibliographic confusion, authors should adopt a more skeptical attitude toward the phrase "in press." Does it represent a fact or a hope? To obviate the need for rapid spread of information by informal prepublication requires a fresh approach, for many journals are now publishing papers about as rapidly as editorial and mechanical limitations permit. Accordingly, we will watch with interest the outcome of a new approach to be tried out by the American Physical Society. The society plans to publish a new journal, the *Physical Review Letters*, at biweekly intervals. Letters or announcements will be published 10 or 11 days after the deadline for each issue; in addition, abstracts of articles scheduled for publication in the *Physical Review* will be published about 3 months in advance. The very rapid publication contemplated by *Physical Review Letters* will be made possible only by omitting some of the time-consuming steps followed—and quite rightly followed—by journals of primary publication. Thus, announcements will not be sent to referees, and authors will not receive proof.

We hope that this venture will succeed. If it does, it may reduce the need for mimeographed publications in physics. At the very least, it will give all researchers in that field an equal chance to keep up-to-date.—G.DuS.

