

Retreat and Workshop Reports

1996 Airlie House Retreat: Report

Martha Tacker

"The Fertile Verge", a term former Librarian of Congress Daniel J Boorstin used to describe American history, certainly applies to the 3rd Airlie House Retreat. If a verge is defined as "a place of encounter between something and something else", the encounters between various subcultures in scientific publication at Airlie House produced a ferment of ideas and viewpoints that can only help participants be more productive and alert to the possibilities in electronic publication.

The retreat, held 1 to 3 November 1996 in the rolling Virginia countryside, was attended by 62 participants, including scientific authors, editors of all stripes, publishers, printers, librarians, Internet experts, and science policy experts. The retreat faculty set the topics and tone in their presentations. Lively discussions in small groups and together in question-and-answer sessions allowed participants to poke and pry into each idea and its implications.

The opening talk, "Method, Meaning, and Media: A New Grammar of Science", read by Faith McLellan in Richard Horton's absence due to a family emergency, examined the parts of a text and how they are put together to communicate messages to readers. Horton's talk described various forms of the scientific paper and suggested that the fragmented, nonlinear construction of the electronic paper may have serious implications not only for the interpretation of research, but also for the roles of editors and readers.

Ronald LaPorte, professor of epidemiology, University of Pittsburgh, and coauthor of "The death of biomedical journals" (*British Medical Journal* 1995;310:1387-90), took the group to the edge with his provocative descriptions of the speed and possibilities inherent in the electronic changes that are occurring with or without us. Is he on target with his prediction that by 2001 AD no more than 10% of current biomedical journals will be published in print?

Valerie Florance, director of the E. G. Miner Library, University of Rochester Medical Center, described the role of librar-

ian as educator, in her case, in a formal program in the medical curriculum to train clinicians and students how to retrieve and then to evaluate information in order to solve clinical problems. She identified factors now used in choosing and using an article for patient care and described possible characteristics of a user-centered electronic article.

Kay Dickersin, director, The Baltimore Cochrane Center, University of Maryland School of Medicine, described the Cochrane Collaboration's background and network for compiling reviews of randomized controlled trials for selected diseases and conditions. The resulting electronic databases of medical trials have full-text links to the original sources and systematic reviews of the methodology and the effectiveness of therapy.

What exactly will scientific communication be in a medium increasingly driven and shaped by commercialization and entertainment companies?

Alexander Politis, assistant editor, *Journal of Immunology*, described development of a new section, "Cutting Edge", available through the journal's Web site. It provides a fast way to communicate brief, high-quality, important research before the print version reaches its readers. In addition to generating excitement among readers, who can participate in an online dialogue about posted articles, this development serves as a pilot project to help prepare the journal for an electronic future.

Michael Held, director, Rockefeller University Press, and Paul Weislogel, vice-president and publishing director, Elsevier Science Inc., presented publishers' perspectives, which included a sense that moving into the electronic realm is essentially inevitable and that rather than simply being content providers, publishers may become

service providers. Projects such as Red Sage have illuminated some of the hurdles such as the costs of start-up and maintenance, user (librarian and reader) expectations, the variety of hardware and software to be accommodated, the need to post a version of the journal that is more than just the paper version, and the lack of traditional guideposts for pricing electronic products.

Marcel LaFollette, research professor of Science and Technology Policy, George Washington University, and editor, *Science Communication*, anchored the retreat with her presentation on ethical, legal, and policy considerations in electronic publication. What exactly will scientific communication be in a medium increasingly driven and shaped by commercialization and entertainment companies? What does science want its communication to be? Composed of fields at various stages along the path toward the electronic world, can science come together to identify and retain the features of scientific communication that are essential to creative, productive scientific research?

Retreat Program Director Faith McLellan, assisted by Susan Eastwood and Christy Wright, is to be commended for her outstanding development of the topic and management of the program on-site. The combination of a provocative topic, stimulating speakers, participatory participants, and unflappable organizers in 1996 has added to the growing reputation of CBE's Airlie House Retreats as the fall event not to be missed. Be a part of the group in 1997. The tentative dates are 24 to 26 October. Mark them on your 1997 calendar now.

DEPARTMENT OF PONDEROUS PROSE

Answer:
Let sleeping dogs lie.

Reprinted with permission from Day RA. *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper* (4th ed). 1994, 174, Oryx Press, Phoenix, Arizona.