

## Henry Oldenburg: The First Science-Journal Editor

Although more than 30 years old, these remain the definitive articles on Henry Oldenburg, who arguably invented science-journal peer review. The articles, both from history journals, are written by the 2 persons who collected his correspondence into, so far, 9 volumes.

### **Hall MB. Oldenburg and the art of scientific communication. *British Journal for the History of Science* 1965;2:277-90.**

Henry Oldenburg (1619-1677), a German, began his career as a tutor of usually English boys and ended as the first secretary of the Royal Society of London for Improving of Natural Knowledge and the first editor of the journal *The Philosophical Transactions*, which he founded and the society adopted as its own. As a tutor, he traveled Europe widely, meeting learned men, and learned to speak 4 major languages fluently. At the same time, although not a scientist (he studied theology), he organized his own network of scientific intercommunication. Such networks were the primary mode of scientific communication at that time. They were developed and coordinated through the letters of persons who knew how to get scientific information from others by offering them new information in return or such gifts as books. These “network administrators” aimed to “incite information rather than passively receive it.”

Scientists wrote to Oldenburg and expected him to transmit their findings to others. He did that through letters or presentations at meetings of the Royal Society. As secretary and editor, he served as an intermediary who sent the comments of society members to correspondents.

Although Oldenburg eventually was paid by the society for his secretarial duties, his financial situation was usually precarious. Therefore, he founded the *Transactions* as a money-making venture. Despite a press run of 1200 copies, it made very little money, and its greatest contribution would be scientific.

### **Hall AR, Hall MB. Why blame Oldenburg? *Isis* 1962;53:482-91.**

History has recorded hostility between Isaac Newton, who formulated the theory of gravity, and his contemporary and competitor Robert Hooke, who formulated the theory of planetary motion. Historians of science, including Thomas Kuhn, attributed the hostility to a “meddling” influence of Henry Oldenburg. This article disputes that theory and in so doing illustrates the skills required of editors and the dangers in mediating peer review. Although the Halls indicate that “seventeenth century customs in these matters were somewhat different from those that prevail now”, the description of the events and their context sounds very familiar to 20th-century ears.

First, in defense of Oldenburg, his whole career was based on making friends, not enemies. Therefore, not surprisingly, he was respected by all who knew him as an indispensable servant of the Royal Society. The misunderstanding about Oldenburg might stem from events when Newton submitted his first report to be considered by the Royal Society. As customary, 3 fellows of the society—including Hooke, the society’s curator of experiments—were assigned to comment on Newton’s submission on light and colors. Only Hooke submitted a critique, which was read at a meeting of the society. At its request, again as customary, Oldenburg sent

the critique to Newton, who wrote back that he was “glad so acute an objector hath said nothing that can enervate any part of [Newton’s original letter].” The Royal Society also determined that Newton’s letter should be printed in the *Transactions*, but it was not “thought fit to print [Newton’s letter and Hooke’s comment] together, lest Mr. Newton should look upon it as a disrespect.”

Another piece of evidence came directly from Hooke in a type of apology he wrote, but it was never published: He stated that he had only perused Newton’s original letter for a few hours and had not intended his critique to be read by Mr Newton. The latter claim cannot be considered valid, inasmuch as Hooke’s comment was written at the society’s request to be read at an open meeting, an established practice of the time—a meeting, moreover, that Hooke knew Newton could very well have attended. More telling, in this apology, Hooke continued to maintain, wrongly as time proved, that “Newton’s discoveries did not invalidate [Hooke’s] own hopes.” Thus, the problem between Hooke and Newton cannot be blamed on Oldenburg but rather was due indirectly to the emerging scientific practice of “knocking men’s heads together to make the intellectual sparks fly . . . that the truth might emerge from the conflict of rival views.”

Do you have suggestions of articles to summarize or periodicals to profile in *Views Afield*? If so, please tell Lynn Dirk, Box 100173, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32610-0173; telephone 352-846-1494; fax 352-846-1497; [ldirk@vpha.health.ufl.edu](mailto:ldirk@vpha.health.ufl.edu).