

# Science Editing as a Meeting (Not Melting!) Point: The Ninth EASE General Assembly and Conference

## Dario Sambunjak

In a multicultural world, it is impossible to think of science as a globally uniform phenomenon. Acknowledging the cultural differences in the realm of science editing, the European Association of Science Editors (EASE) dedicated its ninth general assembly and conference to the discussion of how scientific journals could serve as a meeting point, rather than a melting pot of different cultures.

Some 127 participants from 21 countries attended the conference held on 15-18 June 2006 in Krakow, Poland. The venue was appropriately chosen. The city has a long tradition of scientific culture: its Jagiellonian University was founded in 1364, and the great astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus was one of its alumni. Conference participants were able to feel the spirit of history during the civic reception at the Collegium Maius, a 15th-century building with a spectacular musical clock in the courtyard.

During the annual general meeting, which preceded the opening of the conference, the EASE Council was elected, Arjan Polderman from the Netherlands becoming the new president. Some changes also took place in the Publication Committee, and Moira Johnson-Vekony replaced Hervé Maisonneuve, who stepped down as the editor-in-chief of the EASE journal, *European Science Editing*.

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DARIO SAMBUNJAK is a research fellow at the Zagreb University School of Medicine, Zagreb, Croatia, and an assistant editor at the Croatian Medical Journal.

## Securing Access

The first day of the conference focused on approaches to accessing and archiving scientific data. Cliff Morgan, of Wiley, illustrated the difficulties in archiving digital material by reminding us of 5.25-inch floppy disks, which were once the cutting-edge technology but nowadays are obsolete and practically useless. The scary prospect of being unable to read today's cutting-edge data carriers in the (not so distant!) future has prompted many initiatives in digital archiving. Some of them involve national libraries (such as electronic legal deposit), third-party trusted repositories (such as Portico), or distributed archives (such as LOCKSS); others are based on publishers' own archives (such as Wiley's DART) or archive services (such as Holtzbrinck's BookStore). The conclusion was that there is still no definitive and bulletproof way of "securing access to the past".

Even in the present, there is a gap in access to scientific information between West and East, argued Volodymyr Lysenko, of the University of Washington; he was unable to come to the meeting, and Roderick Hunt gave his presentation. The geographic gap is not present in the transfer of knowledge as much from West to East as in the other direction. For example, about 3000 scientific journals are published in Russia, but only 5% to 10% of them have electronic editions. Furthermore, 80% of the work of Russian scientists is published in Russian journals not covered by Science Citation Index (SCI) of the Thomson Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) and is therefore poorly visible to the scientific community of the West. Lysenko proposed the creation of national citation indexes for eastern European countries and

the creation of an interface between citations of eastern European authors in their national indexes and the international SCI database.

## Machine Counting?

The issue of citations and the (in)famous impact factor came up on the second day of the conference, during and after the speech delivered by James Testa, of ISI. He described ISI's journal selection process, attracting the attention of editors in the audience who still struggle to get their journals into the prestigious database. In the questions-and-answers part of the session, Testa acknowledged that the impact factor is sometimes inappropriately used for assessing the value of individual scientists or their articles. "The only way you can really assess the value of a scientific article is to read it", Testa said. "It cannot be done by any sort of machine counting." A lively, almost passionate discussion of the impact factor was a clear indication of its profound and controversial effect on the contemporary scientific culture.

Marek Graczynski, CEO of Index Copernicus, presented a database that could answer some of the concerns expressed in the previous speeches and discussions. Index Copernicus is developed to be inclusive, transparent, and decentralized and to allow journals self-administration. The system can also be used to evaluate the careers of individual scientists on the basis of several measures and thus serves as a better indicator of a person's scientific merit than the impact factor of journals in which he or she publishes.

## The Price of English

The conference participants then broke

into two groups to attend parallel sessions. In the first one, titled “The Language and Culture of Science Publication”, Elise Langdon-Neuner, of Baxter AG, Austria, set the tone with the provocative statement that “it is not important what you do, but how you communicate what you do”. It was perhaps more precise to say “how you communicate—in English”. Langdon-Neuner illustrated her point by presenting the results of a study that showed that among a nation’s publication-output determinants, investment in research is important but English proficiency even more so. Keith Dawes, of the German Clinical Research Organization, suggested several ways for nonnative speakers of English to help themselves. One effective and inexpensive method of improving the language of manuscripts is peer editing in the form of publication clubs at academic institutions. Roman Tertil, the third panelist and a professional translator in Poland, summed up the dilemma of nonnative speakers in three words: “ENGLISH or €NGŁI\$H?” Lack of language skills can indeed cost a scientist a lot of money.

The second parallel discussion dealt with problems of authorship and evaluation. Ana Ivaniš, of the *Croatian Medical Journal*, presented the results of a study that showed that the response format determines how likely authors are to meet the authorship criteria of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. Changing tack, Andrew Herxheimer, of Oxford, UK, made the case for publishing more qualitative research. He noted that quantitative and qualitative methods do not compete with one another and expressed concern with the fact that many proponents of evidence-based decision-making in health care do not accept the importance of qualitative research.

### Sharing Journals, Reviewers, and Know-How

During the last plenary session of the day, two speakers from Sweden had something to say about the culture of sharing. Lars Björnshauge, a librarian at Lund University, informed us that the Directory

of Open Access Journals, maintained by his institution, currently includes more than 2275 journals. Still, open access raises some difficult questions with respect to intellectual-property rights. For example, who, if anyone, should have the ownership of the collective scientific memory?

Erik Sandewall, of Linköping University, Sweden, described how scientific expertise can be shared in the electronic environment. Editors at his journal, *Electronic Transactions on Artificial Intelligence*, devised and piloted an open peer-review system, a radical departure from traditional “closed” peer review.

Two speakers from Croatia opened the third day of the conference. Ana Marusic, of the *Croatian Medical Journal*, described the author-helpful policy of her journal. She noted that poor English is not the most difficult problem with articles submitted to her journal, and she explained that manuscripts could be improved on four levels: study quality, narrative, scientific reporting style, and language. Science editors, Marusic added, should work as educators to raise the standards of science in their countries. Igor Vlahovic, a geologist from Croatia, warned that small journals might turn into fossils if they fail to adhere to the highest standards of scientific editing. In parallel sessions that followed, the conference participants could hear about some local success stories of non-English journals, and Anthony Robbins, editor of the *Journal of Public Health Policy*, presented his “AuthorAID” global program of developmental-editing assistance, which was, as we heard, also welcomed at the recent CSE meeting in Tampa, Florida.

### Translation and Dialogue

The last day of the conference was dedicated to the culture of science translation and communication of science to society. Noah Hardy, a freelance translator, described how his involvement in preparing manuscripts sometimes led him to be invited to be a coauthor, which caused some controversy in the discussion.

Hooman Momen, coordinator of the World Health Organization press, pointed

out that scientific knowledge needs to be translated into policy and policy into action. He described this process as knowledge-brokering. Mike Clarke, of the UK Cochrane Collaboration, presented an interesting new tool that could serve the purpose of knowledge-brokering. The Evidence Aid project of the Cochrane Collaboration provides and highlights evidence relevant to agencies and people making decisions about health care in natural disasters and other health-care emergencies. The final speech of the conference was delivered by Pawel Walewski, science journalist of the Polish magazine *Polityka*, who helped dozens of patients to find doctors and good advice by writing an article on the stigmatized topic of urinary incontinence.

Although delving into various aspects of the culture of science editing, participants in the EASE conference did not try to come up with definite conclusions or answers. In plenary sessions, presentations of research papers, panel discussions, and informal talks, many different opinions were shared, viewpoints considered, and questions raised. Yet the multitude of voices was not seen as an obstacle. As the UNESCO 1982 Mexico City declaration puts it: “Culture is dialogue, the exchange of ideas and experience and the appreciation of other values and traditions; it withers and dies in isolation.” The EASE conference not only explored the cultural issues in science editing but fostered a culture of dialogue—in spite of all the differences. 🌐