

Proceedings with confidence

Anne Cutler wants to improve the outcome of science conferences

NOBODY loves published conference proceedings. I certainly don't, as readers of this magazine may remember (Forum, 14 December 1991). Proceedings are too big and unwieldy, and waste authors' time by insisting that they write papers to a rigid format. Publications in proceedings are unrefereed, add little weight to a CV and they may even amount to the duplicate publication so detested in most scientific fields if the same results later appear in a refereed journal.

Many readers responded to my views, and no one spoke up for proceedings. So here is a practical suggestion for reform. But first, a note for the uninitiated. There are, in fact, two sorts of conference proceedings. One is a book of assorted chapters that comes from a smallish meeting or workshop, and which (with luck) appears some two years after the event. The other is an enormous tome that emerges from a large international conference and typically contains a four-page report of each presentation. These tomes often contain the same results that are later to be submitted to refereed journals. I aimed my previous diatribe specifically at this sort of proceedings.

Proceedings of the assorted chapter kind exist because organising a conference is time-consuming and expensive, and published proceedings provide some return on this investment.

Scientists who have given up valuable research time to organise a meeting at least get a book with their name on it, and sponsors who have coughed up cash to support the conference can see some tangible return for their financial pains. But by the time the book appears its contents are usually out of date. Also, because the chapters are published unrefereed, just as the papers in the other type of proceedings, they add little to a CV.

Writing in *Physics World* (July 1991), Michael Berry of the University of Bristol said that he deplored proceedings that were published as books of chapters, and commended those that appear as a special issue of a refereed journal. A problem with special issues, however, is that most of the top learned journals shun them. As a consequence, many conference organisers are forced to turn to the not-quite-so-good journals for their published proceedings. One wonders, though, whether the participants complete their contributions to such publications any more willingly than they do for a book?



Ken Coe

I propose a refinement of Berry's suggestion. Let's have a *Journal of Conferences*, and one for each field—*J. Phys. Conf.*, *J. Psych. Conf.* and so on. This would be run by an editorial board of eminent scientists, who would vet, not individual papers, but conference proposals; these, submitted by conference organisers in advance of a meeting, would contain not only abstracts of the papers to be presented, but also a timetable for completion of written papers and a list of proposed reviewers. Once the proposal was accepted by the *J. Conf.* board, the refereeing process and production of the proceedings would be in the hands of the organisers acting as guest editors, with the whole process ultimately audited by a member of the board. *J. Conf.* could thus be a series of thematic special issues, which would appear irregularly, driven by the irregularity of one-off meetings.

There is, however, a drawback: irregular publication is unlikely to appeal to libraries and they will always be the journal's principal customer. Perhaps *J. Conf.* should, like any other journal, contain in each issue

papers on a mixture of topics—that is, from a mixture of conferences (with the conference from which each paper arose, and the guest editors, clearly identified). In this form, *J. Conf.* solves the problem of participants who complete their paper by a set deadline having to wait for their rardier colleagues. Once enough papers from a conference had appeared in the journal, the set could spin off as a limited run book, rewarding organisers by featuring the names of guest editors in gratifyingly large type.

To get *J. Conf.* off the ground, the first few issues should be real crackers. Once established, the journal could become a prestigious outlet, and a *J. Conf.* citation would be an ornament to any self-respecting CV. Serving on the *J. Conf.* editorial board would be seen as a great honour, while having your conference rejected for publication there would be a severe embarrassment. Sponsors would be delighted to support a conference bearing the *J. Conf.* seal of approval, and organisers would reap considerable cachet from organising a *J. Conf.* meeting. Thus the journal would satisfy all the forces which currently conspire to produce largely unwanted books of chapters.

Now how about the other type of conference proceedings? The running of large international conferences is usually in the hands of the profit-making outfits, and my guess is that the fat volumes are seen as justifying the high conference fee. In my field such conferences at present cost around £200 for three days. Perhaps the proceedings are quite cheap to produce, but their size and weight suggest that participants are getting something for their money.

The solution here ought to be simple. No doubt professional organisers would be delighted to abandon proceedings; so if participants would stump up £200 for a well-organised conference without proceedings, the problem would be solved. Failing that, one could adopt the splendid proposal suggested by Damien Downing in this magazine's Letters pages (25 January), and publish such proceedings on floppy disc. And finally, because some international gatherings select papers from the proceedings to appear in expanded form in a special issue of a journal, why not put these in *J. Conf.*? □

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