

THEME SECTION

Who needs symposium proceedings?

Idea and coordination: Olav Giere

The significance of symposium proceedings requires critical attention

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MEPS Theme Sections highlight current cutting-edge topics that are usually not, or only peripherally, addressed in formal paper publishing. Such a topic is a critical assessment of the value of symposium proceedings.

I have 4 reasons to believe that most symposia or congresses would benefit if they omitted printed proceedings.

(1) The participants would be more likely to present new, provocative, but not yet publishable information, ideas and hypotheses. Hence, discussions would be more lively and symposia would regain their intended function, i.e. that of providing a forum for the exchange and discussion of important new contributions. Their printing platform would be one of the relevant journals (and not the proceedings). Good for the scientific standard of symposia.

(2) Scientists whose major reason for attendance is simply to add to their publication list by presenting otherwise not-easy-to-publish and not necessarily first-class original papers would be discouraged to come. Good for the symposium.

(3) Fees could be considerably reduced. Good for attracting and integrating more colleagues, especially younger ones with more limited budgets.

(4) Library acquisitions could focus on first-class contributions. Good for their budgets and your reading time.

Conclusion: 'Proceedings' are rarely scientifically rewarding (the few existing exceptions just prove the rule!), they are burdening our budgets, and they lower the quality standard of symposia.

A personal view of the situation. Following every symposium/conference/congress, you as a participant are requested to submit your manuscript to the organizers. Participants not yet ready are urged to do so as soon as possible. You do your best (last minute changes, additions to the reference list etc.) and proudly send your paper only a month later to the

editor(s). They, of course, have promised to publish the 'Proceedings of the ...' after careful and critical revision not later than 1 yr after the symposium. And now you generally wait for 2 yr for the volume to appear.

I have watched the scene for many years and have observed the following:

- the tendency of many participants to present meager papers at the meeting while preserving their pearls for later publication in noted scientific journals;
- pressure by symposium organizers to publish by a pre-set date;
- the often long and frustrating wait for publication.

What is the result? Those of us sitting in appointment committees have often heard comments such as 'Yes, the candidate has published many papers, but where? Mainly in symposium proceedings!'

Why then are there so many 'Proceedings' volumes on the market? Perhaps because they benefit publishers who have the unique chance to publish a book without any risk, on a pre-paid (by symposium fees!) basis and, thus, enjoy financial security by selling to pre-arranged consumers (the symposium participants) at pre-calculated prices?

Some explanations. The editors' dilemma casts light on the problems with symposium proceedings:

Why are proceedings so notoriously slow? Because the editors are dependent on the contributions and their reviewers. If they really published a volume within a reasonable time after the symposium, they could only include those few papers submitted on time—and that would hardly mirror the contents of the symposium. So they have to wait for the slow colleagues, both among the participants/contributors and the reviewers, and they are many!

Why are proceedings so notoriously mediocre? If a rigid peer review selected only the few notable papers and turned down all the more iterative or tentative contributions, again the resulting volume would not really represent the meeting—it would rather reflect its ideal counterpart.

Why is the distribution of symposium proceedings necessarily so limited? This is a result of the 2 factors outlined above: (1) The limited circulation, restricted to little more than the comparatively small number of conference participants, forces the publisher to set a

high price. (2) Meager quality does not sell! Only a few institutions will buy the volume, considering the limited relevance of its contents.

Symposia 'freed' from proceedings. These contentions imply that symposium proceedings have a negative effect on symposia. Symposia with only oral presentations, not meant for a printed volume, would have talks with daring and not always proven hypotheses rather than old, tired stories which have been warmed up several times. They would present refreshingly provocative findings which would elicit vivid discussions. These often would then serve as a basis for continuing scientific communication among participants. Thus, they would bring our meetings back to what they originally were intended for: platforms of scientific exchange and debate. Such presentations are perfectly fitting with what I consider to be a good symposium.

In an attempt to present a balanced view, I have invited several colleagues to participate in the discussion: Ferdinando Boero, Erik Bonsdorf, Tom Fenchel, Carlo Heip together with his collaborators Peter Herman and Jack Middelburg, and Gerd Liebezeit. Their comments follow.

More space for provocative ideas!

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Many years ago I began—when contributing to meetings—to publish an abridged version of my research for the symposium proceedings, but sent the 'real' paper to a journal. I agree here with Dr Giere. My strategy was: be where the action is and then publish where the impact is.

Expanding Olav Giere's contention, I would add: Who needs meetings? There are (too) many of them and they are often so expensive that both time and budget requirements may become prohibitive. Frequently, potentially interesting meetings end up being not very rewarding. Meetings are useful for seeing friends, getting to know new people, setting up multi-author projects and the like. That's why I prefer the coffee breaks to most of the official presentations.

On the other hand, I can also report here on more positive experiences: Together with some friends, I founded the Hydrozoan Society in 1985. We arrange two week workshops whose results are published regularly as a book containing all the contributions. The first volume was published by Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press, the others as special issues of

Scientia Marina. My colleagues and I use these books all the time. Proceedings may be useful if they are very focused. The American Society of Limnology and Oceanography organizes big meetings but no proceedings; they have a journal. So does the American Society of Ecology, and also the European Society of Evolutionary Biology, as well as the Linnean Society.

Many meetings and many invited lectures are often lost in the cryptic 'proceedings'. Why not dedicate a section of a journal to these contributions, submitted by the scientific society that organised the meeting? The nearest thing to this is the Topic section in *P.S.Z.N. I: Marine Ecology*. But there is no agreement among societies in defining a platform for their top contributions, especially for reviews. Well, now there is *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* which does this job, but I think that there is much more need for this kind of contribution.

Marine ecology is still more a collection of facts than a burst of new ideas. With experimental ecology this attitude becomes even more evident. A nicely packaged set of experiments, if spotless from a methodological point of view, is more likely to be accepted than a daring paper with more ideas than data and numbers. A new journal, *Ecology Letters*, has an 'Ideas' section just for this. The 'Forum' section in *Oikos* is also worth looking at. But, again, there is never enough space for ideas.

Meetings should *not* be intended to be a stage for nicely performed work; they should rather be the stage for presenting new, daring hypotheses. Not so many novel concepts are produced each year. Most of the published work is confirmatory. So, here's my recipe: a few interesting and provocative meetings should replace many boring ones. The proceedings should be a place where one 'throws stones in the pond' as we say in Italy (i.e. creates waves in established systems). Or, as Dr Giere suggests, there should be no proceedings at all! Let's document the meeting by mentioning that the paper published in journal *x* was originally presented at the meeting *y*.

Maybe 'Proceedings' are important after all?

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Many of the points raised by Olav Giere are valid, but there may also be some benefits with such volumes (either as paper copies or in electronic format).

Who benefits from the proceedings? As I see it, there are 3 groups (omitting the publishing houses):

(1) The organisers of conferences: In order to satisfy financiers, employers and one's own ego, it can be good to have an 'end-product' to show for all the efforts one puts into organising a conference. Organising meetings is time-consuming, and one's publishing record usually suffers a significant dip for at least a year around the conference dates, and then simply editing a volume might be worthwhile (and sometimes even fun).

(2) The participants of the meetings: In today's specialised world, proceedings of workshops are often the only up-to-date source (or collection) of information on a specific topic.

(3) Students and teachers within a specific field: For them (not having attended the meeting in question), good proceedings volumes may be goldmines of information within a specific field. There are recent books in ecology and marine biology that have gained textbook status (which was sometimes even the goal for the organisers of meetings), as they provide an overview of a specific field. A good proceedings volume is valuable for anyone with students who need an introduction to a general field ('marine ecology') or a specific topic ('nutrient dynamics of the Mediterranean' etc.). This aspect can of course be questioned when (a) dealing with general symposia (e.g. the annual European Marine Biology Symposia), (b) considering the vast overproduction of printed information within any field of science, or (c) utilising the opportunities of the internet, and electronic publishing.

Prof. Giere questions the scientific quality of proceedings; this may or may not be valid. It must be up to any organiser or editor to choose professional referees and reviewers for the submitted manuscripts. In some cases it may be useful to print papers dealing with specific geographic regions or with fields of research that do not easily fit in with the major journals. One must also bear in mind the highly variable quality of papers in any journal. We have a tendency to only read what we like—maybe the core of the problem is not the publishing of proceedings as such, but rather the enormous mass of information hitting us every day.

Should yet another book or volume appear after conferences and similar meetings? Of course, there is no simple answer to this question—the negative points raised by Giere may well be valid, but there may also be benefits for different levels of users and consumers. But the worst case, as I see it, is publication of over-ambitious collections of Abstracts, which tend to be cited if no proceedings are printed.

Summarizing, I welcome the suggestion that we present ongoing research during conferences and that we

publish in established journals, but I do not see the 'world of proceedings' quite as black or white as Olav Giere does. I still look forward to seeing good proceedings volumes!

Symposium proceedings—only a part of the problem

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By and large I can only agree with Olav Giere. The requirement to write something afterwards is a nuisance for most symposium attendants (at least I am considerably more likely to accept an invitation to a symposium if there is no such obligation). Editing symposium volumes is even worse: authors frequently submit their manuscripts long after the given deadline, if at all (hence the long production time). And external refereeing notwithstanding, it is usually impossible to reject a manuscript or just to ask for substantial changes: after all, the authors were originally invited or welcomed. The contents of symposium volumes are often a rehash of what has been printed elsewhere and anyway the prohibitively high price means a limited distribution. Some funding agencies make the publication of such volumes conditional on support for symposia; it would be desirable if they reconsidered this policy.

I have, however, 2 things to say in this context. One is that some symposium volumes have actually been successful and, in fact, included papers that are influential and widely cited. Symposium volumes sometimes also provide an (almost) up-to-date picture of the current state of some area of research. Such volumes may be of value to graduate students or to others who are about to enter a particular field. No doubt the number of published symposium volumes should be substantially reduced, but also the *genre* should be taken more seriously by editors as well as by authors.

The second thing is the question whether the problem is not common to all types of scientific publications. New journals appear all the time and old ones continue to increase in volume as well as in subscription price—to the point where even large libraries must give up subscriptions. Refereeing becomes an increasing burden for anyone who is just moderately established in some field and nobody can keep up with the literature even within narrow specialities. Altogether: are there not too many papers that should

never have been published? Many such papers simply describe a single experiment or observation and they are published only because referees find no errors, but not because they represent any real discovery, originality or thorough treatment of some problem. In this light, symposium volumes perhaps represent only a small part of the problem.

The coin has two sides

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We should include in this debate also 'special issues'. In general, we agree with Dr Giere's arguments: the quality of Symposium Proceedings and special issues is variable—from average to poor. There is a lot of dumping of mediocre material. Still, the volumes continue to appear, because a book as the outcome of an expensive and sponsored conference is always a good PR instrument, a proof of success for bureaucrats and fund givers—agencies that are less concerned with quality. They are also popular because of the 'publish or perish' syndrome to which most scientists are subjected.

In any case, the quality of symposium proceedings is lower than in regular journals because:

- peer review is often done by 'friendly colleagues';
- contributions that have been rejected elsewhere are resubmitted;
- contributions by colleagues whose participation has been requested are difficult to refuse;
- the distribution is very limited.

Among the numerous problems with symposium proceedings, the time delay is particularly difficult to tackle because slow papers may be good and essential. The editors have to strike a balance between complete and fast publication, between good (often slow) and weak papers. Fixed deadlines are a must both for submission and resubmission.

However, if volumes bring together papers on a single subject or geographic area, these 'special issues' can indeed be of interest. Coming from different disciplines the contributions would never be read in conjunction when submitted to their professional journals. In special volumes papers may be included that contain basic information that would otherwise be difficult to publish but that is relevant in a particular context. An editor's summary or review of the research may also add to the overall value of a collection of coherent

papers in a special volume. It is up to the editor to ensure high quality and low degree of overlap.

In exceptional cases, special issues may even become standard texts.

So, in conclusion, our answer to Olav Giere's initiative is 'yes' and 'no'.

Symposium proceedings: is quality community-size-related?

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Having been on both sides of the desk, I do agree with Dr Giere's arguments. Both as an author and editor, writing for and editing conference proceedings is a rather frustrating task and one of the less rewarding experiences in a scientist's life. As an author, after you have done your bit, the only virtue you have to display is patience—the volume will eventually appear on your desk, most probably after you have long forgotten about it. This underlines Giere's statement about the lack of importance established scientists tend to give to their contributions.

As an editor, even if you can assemble enough contributions, you still have to shepherd a group of individualists usually heavily engaged in other activities towards a common goal. And after having put enough more or less polite pressure on them you may eventually be ready within the promised time and send a set of flawless, painstakingly prepared manuscripts for print to the publisher. But further frustration lurks in the mail when you receive—again after some months delay—the galley proofs. Typos, misplaced or missing figures and tables.... Thus, from a technical point of view alone, conference proceedings should be eliminated.

On the other hand, being active in other fields of marine science as well, I have also had quite different experiences. Speedy reviews, strict adherence to deadlines, and competent publishing resulted in the production of the conference proceedings at the promised date. It thus appears to me that the problem addressed by Giere might be specific to marine biology/ecology and that it might be related to the small size of this particular scientific community. One knows each other quite well; one has worked and partied together. It is known that friendships (and incidentally also hostilities) are much stronger in small communities than in larger ones.

Another point put forward by Giere is that proceedings tend to contain 'second rate' science. I would not go as far as that in quite a number of cases. It is true that the established and experienced scientist, expecting the proceedings to be out about 2 yr after the conference, will not usually, if at all, submit the hottest and most exciting material. However, proceedings are often the first platform for novices who experience this particular form of scientific communication as their 'entrée' into the scientific community. Knowing this, perhaps unconsciously or inadvertently, editors tend to

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be less diligent with these manuscript, possibly again a community size effect. This does not mean it is second rate or, worse, poor science. It is simply lack of experience resulting in publications of lower quality. Here is a point where co-authors, often 'trained' thesis advisors or at least experienced scientists, have to be called to their duty.

*Further comments are invited. They should be
addressed to Prof. Olav Giere.*

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