

From the President's desk



As members of SEB, we are all involved with the dissemination of the science we do – experimental biology. But in the connected world, what is meant by dissemination? How do we go about promoting and increasing the influence of experimental biology within the scientific community? If you think about where you find out about experimental biology – your own areas of interest, and the subject in its much broader context – the answer “primary refereed Journals”, is probably the first response to this question. However, if you are anything like me, key sources of information about what is happening – the breakthroughs, the details and the controversies – will come from a wide range of other sources. While information overload is infinitely preferable to information deficit, how do you filter the amount of information which could reach each one of us? The number and nature of the information sources available to experimental biologists is changing incredibly rapidly and, what’s more, each scientist will have chosen different options from the dozens available.

A few years ago, a weekly trip to the library to browse a small number of Journals would cover most of one’s needs; now, I subscribe to about 20 tables of contents from publishers but a small fraction of the papers I read and use come from these and, for peripheral areas, none at all. For a while, review journals were important to me – I used to eagerly await each issue of the various Trends in XXX and Nature Reviews YYY, but somehow

they passed from my radar several years ago, with lack of focus and lack of speed. Much more recently, but very short-lived, were RSS feeds – the rate of e-mails popping up in the corner of my screen was more than I could cope with, let alone filtered paper titles. Now, I choose to receive many newsletters, discussion group postings, and other review-type alerts, many of which not only point to the primary articles, but have a short summary, ideally concentrating on the consequences of the work as much as the results which are present in the abstract. More often than not, the pointer is all there is time to read. I also receive titles from several keyword searches on a weekly basis, and the versatility of these is increasingly usable. I’m a member of a couple of useful groups on LinkedIn related to the applied end of my research, but I have yet to find really useful, research-oriented Twitter, Facebook (where SEB has recently started a group), or other feeds that meet research needs and are at an appropriate level. I hope somebody reading this will suggest some worthwhile sources! Of course, for one-off searches, despite Web-of-Science/ISI ever improving, it is hard to beat Google or Google Scholar for a quick check of almost anything, with the instant measure of times-cited to suggest key papers in an area.

Interestingly, science-by-press release seems to be on the decline. If you believed the releases, you would think that all the model species and half the animals and plants in agriculture had been sequenced: I am pictured in this first SEB president’s letter with six of the eight plant species that actually have been sequenced (maize and soybean are missing). While perhaps fewer of us really browse journals today, the role of editors in choosing papers relevant to their readership is perhaps even more important than that of a decade ago. Many of us have been emphasizing to anyone (whether listening or not) how important it is that science is backed up by rigorously reviewed papers in primary Journals. The message seems to be getting home: an increasing number of major media stories (whether from the Daily Mirror, New York Times, Le Monde,

Frankfurter Allgemeine, or on the BBC), make clear reference to the refereed source of the report. In contrast, search Google for ‘oil palm genome sequence’ and you will find the same press release on dozens of sites, but no publication in any recognized Journal, or major newspaper. So it looks like we as scientists have done pretty well in getting the importance of review across, although perhaps the latest evidence for this came as a surprise: As I write, the IPCC climate change panel and its Chair are in trouble for quoting non-reviewed works including a student dissertation, New Scientist and a mountaineering magazine as sources in their reports. Interestingly, related articles have raised the issue of the quality and nature of peer review from an obscure topic discussed by scientists to the front page of newspapers worldwide.

Of course, my thoughts on dissemination to peers and public bring me back to the SEB and the role of conferences in dissemination. Conferences should be all about conferring, but increasingly many seem to be dominated by the ‘airport professor’ - where the speaker comes in to present their talk at you, with no sign of the people who did the work. The other type of conference or workshop can be very specialised – great if your topic is Z-channel over-receptor polymorphisms, but not always ideal if you are looking for a faculty position or for different ideas. At SEB our session organisers work very hard to ensure conferences are for conferring, and we try to make space in the programme for plenty of opportunities for discussions and networking, with everyone having the chance to present talks or take part in high-profile poster sessions.

I’m looking forward to seeing most of you in Prague – a conference site that could have been designed for us with rooms arranged around a large social and congregation area which will include the posters, and that’s before I think about some of the best beer anywhere.

Pat Heslop-Harrison
Honorary President