



Book reviews

Publishing in soil science: historical developments and current trends

By Alfred E. Hartemink. IUSS, Vienna. Softcover, 196 pp. ISBN 90-6672-075-1. € 17

In 1955, *Soils and Fertilizers* carried an editorial about the state of publishing in Soil Science. Entitled “The Research Factory”, it reported with biting eloquence that in 3 years from 1950, 8000 authors produced 10,000 papers. “What”, the anonymous author[s] asked, “do these ten thousand bits of knowledge amount to when integrated into the already existing store?” And, “What has been achieved by the twenty-four millenniums of research that have been devoted to soil science in the last three years?” (Anon., 1955).

Fifty years on, their question remains as relevant as ever—of what use is the unrelenting stream of papers that gushes from our collective printers? How good is our writing, both at explaining what we have done and at pointing to what we should yet do? The last 50 years have been oddly silent on the question. But now, appearing in the void, is a new book by Alfred Hartemink: “Publishing in soil science: historical developments and current trends”.

The book is a compilation of previously published papers, organized into three sections: Historical developments in soil science (two papers), Publishing in soil science (seven papers) and a Case study (one paper). Its centrepiece is a series of six papers, each focusing on a specific theme: ‘journal prices and impact’, ‘how much we write’, ‘fraud and ethics’, ‘electronic publishing’, ‘soil science for business’ and ‘soil science for pleasure’. Thus, the author plunges into topics often in our thoughts, but rarely put to paper.

Why would soil (and other) scientists want to read this book? Let me suggest two reasons. First, the book is an enlightening treasury of publishing facts and trivia. You can learn, for example, about numbers of papers originating in developing countries compared to those from developed countries (“more publications appear on Australia than on the whole of Africa”) or the recent surge in number of soil science journals (“five of the eleven current leading soil science journals did not exist in the 1970’s”). You can find the number of soil scientists per hectare of agricultural land in selected countries (0.2–55.1) or the ballooning number of papers per year in soil science (from 1363 in 1938 to 8711 in 1998). You can ponder the changing proportions of papers describing ‘laboratory’, ‘field’ and ‘desk’ studies (‘desk’ studies are increasing largely at the expense of ‘laboratory’ studies) or contemplate the growing number of authors per paper (from an average of 1.7 in 1967 to 3.1 in 2000, in *Geoderma*). These and other indicators tell us something about how our science and our writing are evolving. But the book serves a deeper purpose.

The bigger reason scientists might pick up this book is that it steers our thoughts to questions and issues that, for too long, have festered quietly in the background; questions

such as: What is the incidence of fraud and plagiarism in our literature? Are we publishing too many papers? Is there opportunity enough in our journals to “express idiosyncratic ideas”? Might electronic publishing undermine the sanctity of peer review? And along with the questions, come provocative insights, some from polls of other editors. Consider these examples (not necessarily representative): “I think fraud can only possibly be a tiny problem in soil science, bad scientific practice is a much bigger one, but by far the biggest problem we have is a lack of new ideas.” And, “Sometimes when I peruse journals I think we have catwalks of supermodels in soil science”, alluding to the famous supermodel who “read only what she wrote” (A.B. McBratney). And, “. . . soil science simply yields too little fame and money to swindle.” And, since “we all know 80% of the papers are never cited”, perhaps we should impose a maximum of two papers per author per year. Few readers will agree with all the proffered points of view; but the intent, I suspect, was less to provide answers than to provoke a debate, now long overdue.

A reviewer is also obliged to root out places where the book disappoints. And I will try not to disappoint. My main complaint is the layout of the book—a compendium of reprints, stuck between two covers, with original typeset still largely intact. As a result, the reader is bewildered by shifting fonts and formats, by page numbers madly out of sequence, and by excerpts, once read, reappearing again in later sections. As one not confronted with the task (or the cost), I regret the insights were not redistilled into a seamless flow, with a tidy ending—perhaps a list of provocative questions. I might also grouse, if offered the chance, about the occasional editing flaws (misspellings, grammatical deviation, imprecise citation), or about the ‘administrative’ flavour of the history (I learn about dates and commissions and congresses, when what I really seek is ‘story’). But these grumblings, I trust, will not deter the potential reader.

Alleged deficiencies aside, the book deserves our attention, if only to spur on the debates too long delayed. At one point in the book, Hartemink notes, somewhat plaintively, “As with previous articles, [this paper] is meant to stimulate and provoke discussion, and thus far that has not been a roaring success”. Perhaps now, with this bold and timely book, that success will come—to the benefit of our science.

Reference

Anon., 1955. The research factory. *Soils and Fertilizers* XVIII, 275–279.

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