

# A new-look Journal?

By Piers Maclaren

The NZIF Council has a Publications subcommittee, of which I am part. This subcommittee is currently investigating the best way forward for our members' magazine. Included in the recommendations is a structure of the Journal's proposed contents: editorial, feature articles, refereed articles, professional papers, Institute news, and so on.

My personal wish is to edit a journal that our members would actually enjoy reading. Given members' busy agendas and the vast quantities of written material that they are reluctantly obliged to absorb in a given week, why would they choose to read this one? Because the Journal could be written in a lively style, attractively illustrated and with short, pithy articles. There would be something in every issue to interest everyone. I have fallen far short of my own goal, as this particular edition demonstrates, and later on some possible reasons are suggested.

To demonstrate the potential, we need to look no further than other magazines serving a similar function. The Institution of Professional Engineers, for example, produces a very interesting magazine called "e.nz" which is exactly the type of publication I have in mind. It is colourful, spans the full range of things engineers do, and is a pleasure to read - even for a non engineer. How can IPENZ achieve this? For a start, engineers are a larger group than foresters and they have more resources: they employ a professional editor and can print 48 pages in full colour (which is twice the price of black and white).

A second reason for the successful magazine is that e.nz does not seem to be under any obligation to publish academic results in full. Scientists, and university academics, must publish a certain number of papers in reputable journals annually to fulfil their obligations. There is therefore a "contributor push" rather than a "reader pull". Material is forced on an editor because the writer wants to report that the research has been accepted in an industry publication, rather than because the author has something bursting to say, or because contributions have been solicited. Submitted papers are generally at least four pages long and authors are reluctant to shorten them.

Published papers, especially peer-reviewed ones, are an essential building block in the edifice of Science. As such, it is an honour to be part of such a noble activity. But are times changing? Public meetings on science were once widely attended, but the proliferation and specialisation of scientific output has diluted people's natural curiosity. No longer can any one person be interested in all aspects of science. Even a narrow technical speciality - like forestry - has niches that will interest some but not others: the harvesting expert may

not give a damn about tree breeding.

Scientific styles of writing have not changed with the times. There is a standard scientific format, which is drummed into our heads at school: abstract, introduction, objectives, methods, results, conclusions, references. As dry as a sheet of MDF. The mannerisms used in scientific papers have also become formalised: third person passive, past tense, etc. The jargon reminds me of those endless church services I was forced to attend at school, where it was accepted that God could understand only the English that King James used ("I am he that blotteth out thy transgressions") and there was real anger when contemporary speech appeared in holy buildings. The science writers I most admire are those who can express their subtle views concisely but in simple, ordinary English: Dawkins, Flannery, Sagan, Davies, Leakey, etc. These great people have or had no need to disguise their ignorance in obscure or ambiguous language. Indeed, clear writing demands clear thinking as a prerequisite.

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So what is the solution? Science, and the forestry sector, needs a continuous flow of published papers in all their excruciating detail. The Journal receives a fairly regular supply of such material (including the inevitable contribution from a scientist seeking an outlet for his paper "Minimising monkey damage to Neem trees?") and precious little else. These need to be published, but surely not in the Institute's magazine that is paid for out of membership subscriptions?

Which gets us to the electronic revolution. There is now no longer a need to publish everything on dead trees and deliver it to individual letterboxes. Printed material could contain a short "popular" summary of the paper (NOT a traditional Abstract!) and an internet link. Those who are particularly interested in any topic can click the link and read the full paper, which can be of any length, in full colour, with equations or complex formulae, and replete with cross-references to earlier papers.

Of course, clicking a link is not very simple if you're relaxing on your sofa and reading what the mailman has just brought. But it's the easiest thing in the world if you're at your computer terminal, whether at a desk or with a portable device like an iPod. Furthermore, we shouldn't try to resist the trend towards electronic media, as a sort of reflex action. This conservative attitude will consign our magazine to oblivion faster than anything else. Let's face it, an increasing number of younger people now rely entirely on electronic sources of information. We should be listening to, and learning from, the younger generation. We must change our traditional ways, or else perish.