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PREVENTING SUBSTANCE ABUSE

— by C. Robert Taylor
and John B. Penson, Jr. —

The *CHOICES* debate over the Knutson, Taylor, Penson and Smith (KTPS) chemical study (Fourth Quarter 1990 *CHOICES* and Letters, First Quarter 1991 *CHOICES*) raises several fundamental issues concerning the editorial process of a magazine sponsored by a professional association. These issues pertain to: (a) the ability of a magazine like *CHOICES* to mold perceptions in the minds of those not familiar with the broad literature on a particular topic, and (b) the need for an editorial policy that seeks verification of the accuracy of major accusations leveled at the work of others prior to publication, or seeks to automatically invite a rebuttal from the accused.

Publication Policy

The "chemical wars" debate in *CHOICES* reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of this magazine as a forum for policy

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alternatives. The magazine's ability to address important issues in a timely manner is unmatched in our profession. However, at least in the KTPS instance, style was seemingly preferred over substance. First, the magazine chose to publish the Doering's criticism of studies of chemical bans without any citations or references to exactly what studies he was criticizing. Second, the magazine chose not to publish a synopsis of the KTPS study, written in a style identical to the study itself. The only reason given for the rejection is that it "...was not written in a style suitable for *CHOICES*."

Let us quickly add that rejection of this manuscript is not troubling in and of itself. However, the decision to publish Doering's implicit criticism of the KTPS study and a later decision to allow Ayer and Conklin (AC) to publish their criticism along with their summary of our study, however, is quite disturbing. If our study was important enough to initially merit two *CHOICES* articles by critics, why weren't we offered a chance to at least write a one-page response? Such actions can imply *CHOICES* has a particular bias on an issue.

Our response to the original AC criticism was published only at our instigation and insistence. To his credit, Editor Lyle Schertz listened to our complaints and made a unilateral decision to permit us to respond to the AC criticism as well as to Doering's comments. But perception was already molded by the Doering piece, and by our being placed in a defensive posture in

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a "facing page" format adopted for the initial AC criticisms and KTPS response.

Molding Perceptions

Much like a 30-second spot on the nightly television newscast, *CHOICES* has the capability to mold perceptions many might have about research results or models used in deriving these results. In this light, articles that call for *CHOICES*' readership to ignore the results of a study based upon the critic's "assumptions" about a model's properties, is quite disturbing. Critiques of this type should receive careful scrutiny by unbiased, informed reviewers.

Similarly, suggestions that a study's authors have a hidden agenda because of the policy scenarios it addresses should be evaluated by someone having a knowledge of the literature. The results from our previous studies on chemical bans, restrictions and IPM—which by the way have appeared in *AJAE* and ten other peer reviewed journals, and which were funded by such diverse groups as the USDA, EPA, Rockefeller Foundation, SCS, farm organizations at odds with the AFBA, and several state agricultural experiment stations—have not changed over almost two decades of research. If we've got it wrong, at least we are consistent in our conclusions, and are unbiased as to whom we misinform! It should be the editorial policy of *CHOICES* that

manuscripts resting largely on accusations of bias and shoddy research should automatically trigger an invitation to the "party opposite" to submit a rebuttal. If this delays publication of a manuscript for several weeks or even months, we argue it is worth it. Such a policy is particularly important to an assistant professor attempting to establish a solid reputation in a particular area of research.

Some Final Thoughts

The format for *CHOICES* is ideal for short articles on leading issues. In deciding whether to publish manuscripts that report large-scale analyses or comment on such analyses, the editorial council has a responsibility to ensure some degree of verification and impartiality.

Balancing many subjective factors is indeed difficult, but we believe that *CHOICES* currently places too much emphasis on style and too little on substance.

We argue that articles largely criticizing the work of others should be accepted only if: (1) they have some basis in fact, (2) the critics indicate how they would have done things differently, and (3) both sides are simultaneously presented. We feel this policy can be implemented in a manner that does not destroy creativity, suppress valid criticism, or alter the timeliness of this magazine.