

Current Dilemmas

Why I Publish — The Academic Perspective

*P. A. Wilson, Senior Lecturer,
Department of Ship Science, University of Southampton.*

When I was asked at 4.30.p.m. yesterday what I was doing at 10.30.p.m. today, I answered nothing was in my diary. This is perhaps the popular misconception of how an academic passes his time. In reality I had planned to re-work some mathematical theory that generates the motion of a ship in a random seaway and hence check with a computer model that had previously been generated. I guessed that this could however be delayed for half a day, since after a few moments reflection I had agreed to give this talk. It seemed to me akin to the mandatory essay that is given to school children after the summer holidays, titled "What I did in the Holidays". In my case, it is a mandatory medium for me to tell the world of my research, and perhaps more importantly for today for me to reflect the implied question posed in the title.

As a necessary requirement of my contract with the University I have to lecture and to research. As an endpoint to all research it is necessary to inform others of my findings and "discoveries". The "others" will be fellow academics, industrialists and government scientists.

If I initially turn the question around, as to why do I read published work i.e. to inform me of developments in the areas that I work in, then this answers, in one way the reason why I want to publish. I need to know of new developments and changes in regulations, changes of the market which cause design differences. An example that is very topical is the car-ferry stability criteria after the "Herald of Free Enterprise" disaster. The criterion for safety is moving from a deterministic approach to a probabilistic one. Not only does this have serious ramifications to me as a Naval Architect, but also to me as a member of the fare paying public. To quote from a recent article on this topic. "In probabilistic concepts a ship need not necessarily survive every possible case of assumed damage provided that there are sufficient survival cases in an aggregate which contributes to the minimum acceptable standard". I am very worried

by such a statement and will ultimately be publishing my thoughts on this matter.

Thus to be trite it is necessary for my own peace of mind that I publish results of any research that is carried out by me or by someone supervised by me.

To achieve senior academic status within the University it is necessary to publish regularly and also more importantly with high quality. British Universities have not yet gone down the path of North American Universities, where there is often a set number of publications necessary for tenure of the post that you occupy, or for that tenure to be granted. This often results in shallow publications and more often in multiple duplications that all need reading by other researchers in case something new slips out. With the recent research selectivity review exercise that has been coupled with money received in the departments of preeminence, it is now perhaps necessary to publish to survive.

Along with the question of why I publish is coupled, in my mind and equally important to me, is where, when and how? Publishing within my field (sea) of interest is often limited because of the numbers studying the subject and hence market forces preclude book writing as a paying concern, since in the U.K. there are possibly only 100 students in any particular year of study. Thus the majority of my publications are at conferences and in research journals.

Firstly at conferences there are four basic reasons.

- a) To show that I am active in the area of interest of the conference.
- b) To attract attention of industrialists, so that industrial contacts and hence hopefully research contracts can follow.
- c) To attract consultancy money and hence further research contracts.
- d) To attract attention of assessors of government research agencies.

To publish in research journals serves two main purposes.

- a) To give a longer reflected view of the research.
- b) To attract that now rare commodity, research students. It is certainly been the case that publishing attracts young minds.

The decision to publish also causes some soul searching since it may require some courage, since

new ideas can be thrown in and hence out equally quickly. Although this is not as common in the present time as in the past.

Often publications are aimed at a promotional point and if the promotion does not follow the question changes its emphasis to Why do I publish?!

In the end, the reason why I publish is, that I enjoy it. □