

FROM THE EDITOR

Against the rising flood of information

Charles Day

Every two years or so, PHYSICS TODAY conducts a reader survey to find out what you like and don't like about the magazine. If you've ever completed one of our surveys, thank you! For the past two decades, the responses have been consistent in their near-universal approval for the Search and Discovery department.

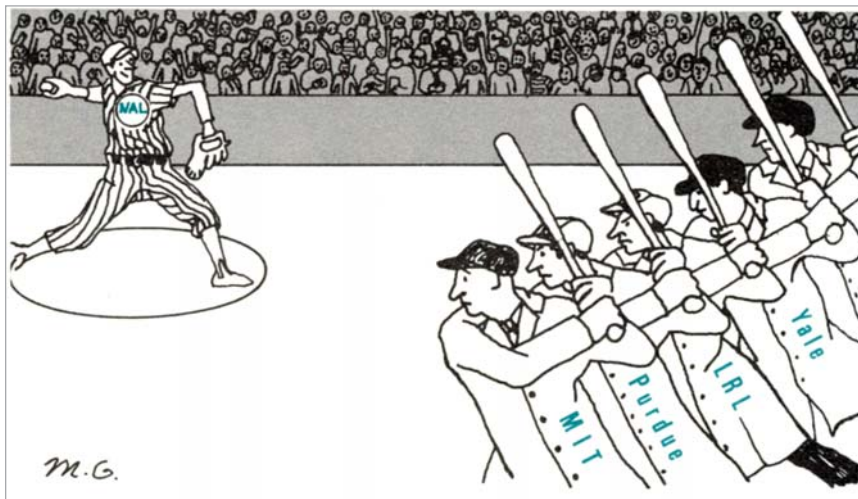
That finding is gratifying, not least because I ran the department in 2003–10. Having edited several hundred news stories, I know firsthand how diligently the Search team works to identify and explain significant advances in physics and its related sciences.

The Search and Discovery department made its debut on page 105 of the January 1967 issue. Before then, physics news ran in a department called Research Facilities and Programs. When readers turned to the new department, they found reports on the use of physics in archaeology, the discovery of element 102, the construction of a new electron-positron storage ring by the Midwestern Universities Research Association, a classified NASA investigation into building a giant orbiting mirror to illuminate battlefields at night, and the development of UV lasers.

The editor-in-chief at the time, R. Hobart Ellis Jr, chose not to devote one of his regular editorials to the new department. But three years later, the magazine underwent a redesign that entailed, among other things, Search and Discovery being printed on colored paper and moving to the front of the book. About the changes, which appeared in the September 1970 issue, Ellis's successor, Harold L. Davis, wrote

The increased emphasis on these fast-reading news columns is our way of trying to help physicists survive one of the major perils facing modern scientists—that of drowning in the rising flood of unfiltered information.

Davis's words from the pre-internet era might seem quaint. Just how much of an information flood was there in 1967, you might ask? A lot. Fifty years ago most US cities had more than one daily newspaper. Advertising in print and on radio, TV,



THIS CARTOON RAN WITH A SEARCH STORY FROM SEPTEMBER 1970. The topic was the competition among particle physicists to get the first crack at using the 500 GeV beam at the National Accelerator Laboratory (as Fermilab was known before 1976).

and billboards was just as pervasive as it is today. Two years earlier in "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," Mick Jagger sang complainingly of useless information supposed to fire his imagination.

As the flood of information continues to rise, Search and Discovery has likely become even more valuable to its readers. On the day I wrote this editorial, I searched EurekaAlert!, an online clearinghouse run by AAAS, for press releases from the past 30 days that contained the word "physics." I found 407. PHYSICS TODAY can't ever keep you up to date with everything that's going on in acoustics, astronomy, atmospheric science, and all the other physical sciences. But once a month we'll report on a handful of papers from the broad spectrum of physics. And we'll continue to do that so long as you tell us you appreciate it.

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