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EDITORIAL	1
PAPERS OF INTEREST	3
TECHNICAL PAPERS	
Simulation of Flow in Circular Clarifiers with and without Swirl. László Szalai, Peter Krebs, and Wolfgang Rodi	4
Hydraulics of Stationary Capsule in Pipe. Henry Liu and James L. Richards	22
Modeling Horizontal Round Buoyant Jets in Shallow Water. A. J. Johnston, C. R. Phillips, and R. E. Volker	41
Flow Velocity Profiles in Gravel-Bed Rivers. Vito Ferro and Giorgio Baiamonte	60
Storm and Entrainment Effects on Tributary Sediment Loads. Deborah H. Lee, Keith W. Bedford, and Chieh-Cheng J. Yen	81
Experimental Study of Debris Flows. Arbind Mainali and Nallamuthu Rajaratnam	104
REVIEWERS OF THE JOURNAL OF HYDRAULIC ENGINEERING	124

EDITORIAL

A GOOD FOUR YEARS

As of this issue I am no longer editor of the *Journal of Hydraulic Engineering*. I have enjoyed the past four years as editor. During that time, the quality of papers has increased and the quality of the reviews has increased. The modern *Journal of Hydraulic Engineering* was begun by John List, who was the first of the "strong editors." With John's leadership the journal has had a resurgence. I have had the freedom to communicate directly with authors, to approve overlength papers, to set more policy, and to make more decisions. The ASCE Board Publications Committee has had the foresight to increase the freedoms of the journal editor, so that decisions have become less bureaucratic, resulting in an increase in quality and efficiency. My successor, Dr. Jacob Odgaard, will continue on this path.

Jacob will set his own policies for the journal. A great deal more can be done to improve this publication. The journal needs an editor with ideas and the energy to carry them out. Jacob meets these criteria. With the support of the authors and readers, and of the profession in general, he will improve this publication. The editor, more than anyone else, is the guardian of standards.

My philosophy has been that a professional journal exists not only to disseminate information, but also to help authors with their research or professional practice. The latter is accomplished through the review process prior to publication and through Discussions after publication. I have been pleased with the quality of reviews of papers (with some exceptions, of course). For the most part the referees have studied the papers and written comprehensive and thoughtful reviews. As a result, the acceptance rate for papers is increasing. Indeed, the rejection of a paper is often a failure on our part, a sign that we have not been able to communicate to the author the proper method of refining or expressing ideas so that they are publishable. Good reviews are the keys to quality.

The system is entirely voluntary, from the standpoint of the editor, the associate editors, and the referees. If some (fortunately a decreasing number) do not wish to contribute their time to this process, an unfair burden is placed on the remainder of the profession. We have to depend on professional integrity, and when that is lacking, the system suffers immensely. To paraphrase Churchill, peer review is a bad system, but it is better than all other systems.

Although the policy of what to publish in *JHE* is now in the capable hands of Jacob, I cannot resist making a statement. In my view this journal is very broad, as the boundaries of hydraulic engineering have expanded during the last 30 years. I have often told the associate editors (only half jokingly) that if it is a good paper it falls within the realm of the *Journal of Hydraulic Engineering*. Such papers include transport of all sorts that involve fluids, gas transfer at an air-water interface, flows of some non-Newtonian fluids, atmospheric processes, oceanic and lake circulation, etc. as well as the subjects traditionally considered to be hydraulic engineering. It includes very practical papers and those that treat a subject theoretically without immediate application. (History is the best judge of the value of a paper, and some of the most "theoretical" contributions comprise the classic papers that have had a large impact on the profession.)

My half-joking statement, however, does not mean that all types of papers should be published. In hydraulic engineering there are a number of "tired"

subjects—traditional subjects that have been written about in profusion. That is not to say that a real contribution cannot be made in traditional subjects, but such a contribution is difficult simply because the subject has been studied extensively. Both experimental and, especially, numerical contributors are often guilty of making small changes in already well-known methods to obtain a slightly different result. These changes often constitute an improvement or new knowledge, but they will never leave tracks in the profession.

The development of a new method in an area in which similar methods are in common use is not enough, even if the new method is an improvement. If the profession has a substantial investment in the old methods, the improvement must be sufficient to pay for the costs of conversion. Those costs can be substantial, for example in learning a new technique and in new software and the training to use it. Thus, a 5% change that holds no promise for subsequent, substantial improvement will make zero impact.

Finally, although I consider the writing in *JHE* to generally be of good quality, I have a word for authors. That word is not the usual admonition to use good, clear English. If you have a good idea, the editors, referees, and copy editors can help you express it in an acceptable manner. (Although well written papers do have a much easier time in the review process and are published more quickly.) My advice is to write the paper with a purpose in mind and for a predetermined audience. The purpose may range from educational (a review paper with nothing new but with a clear explanation of the technology) to pure research. The former is probably intended for a broad audience that is not intimately familiar with the subject. The latter can be intended for the expert; it does not need detailed explanations if such details are found in the literature. The author should make an early statement that informs the reader—and the referees—of the purpose of the paper.

A journal paper is clearly different from a thesis or a technical report. The journal paper must be succinct; it must get to the point with enough detail to be understandable (but “understandable” must be taken in context of the intended audience) without too much detail. An informed reader should be able to reproduce the results but not without a bit of work. If the informed reader can progress from one equation to the next without pencil and paper, the paper probably contains too much detail; if the reader needs to spend more than a very few minutes from one equation to another, it probably needs more detail. In other words, the paper should be understandable without doing the reader’s thinking.

I wish Jacob great success. He will be editor during a period of change, both with respect to the profession and with respect to publishing and the dissemination of ideas. (Will you soon be reading the *Journal of Hydraulic Engineering* on your computer screen?) I’m sure that it will be exciting.

Jim Liggett, *Ex-Editor*
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