

EDITOR'S CORNER

The Annual Meeting as Text or Exhibition

Members of the Society for American Archaeology exchange information and explore new ideas mostly in two places—publications and annual meetings. Each should be a distinctly different forum for communication even though the audience and participants are similar. Increasingly, however, the Society's annual meeting resembles the journals through the verbal presentation of articles and reports, often illustrated with projections of tables and figures. Symposia are frequently oral versions of soon-to-be-published collections of edited papers. Further, some presentations approach the literary character of dramatic readings, and even the hyperscientific papers can exhibit an artistic flair. Are meetings to evolve into journals in the round? Let us hope not. Here are a journal editor's thoughts on keeping the annual meeting distinct and vital to archaeology in the Americas.

Recent years have witnessed a number of complaints about the annual meeting. To begin with, they are too large. The fact remains that ours is a big organization wholly dependent on membership dues and annual-meeting attendance. We not only cannot get smaller, we must grow!

Another complaint is that run-on papers disrupt the schedule and make it difficult to attend individual presentations. This is a special problem for anyone seeking to sample what is happening in the discipline, yet the attention paid to curbing the runaway presenter suggests widespread concern. Timers with loud bells and gongs continue to be effective only in the hands of the mean and powerful. Because there is reason to believe an archaeology paper once set in motion may continue indefinitely, we strive to acquire better technological constraints and meaner session chairs. Run-on papers also erode the little time available for discussion.

My annual-meeting peeve is the Sunday morning session, an ideal solution to a multitude of problems only if you are not assigned to one. At the recent Pittsburgh meeting I addressed an 8:40 Sunday morning audience composed mainly of symposium participants, friends, and, I suppose, local archaeologists who did not have to fly home. A concurrent symposium of much interest to me and relevance to popular themes of social complexity was populated largely by the participants. Clearly, one partial solution to the possibility of a small audience due to scheduling is to organize a symposium with as many participants as possible, but already there is too much preaching to the choir. New ideas must seek the widest audience in order to receive the broadest critique.

The common theme in these complaints is that the annual meeting has lost its uniqueness as an opportunity for scholars, professionals, avocationalists, and students to come together, informally, to exchange information and explore new ideas. The opportunity to meet and interact with archaeologists of similar interests is the special promise of the meeting. It is also a valuable opportunity to explore exciting new work in areas other than one's own, especially when so much is being published that normal readers can barely keep abreast of their own field. One simple mechanism for retaining the uniqueness of the annual meeting, for increasing contact time and discussion, for maximizing the inevitable fact of concurrent sessions, and for sharpening ideas prior to publication is to have more POSTERS.

Poster sessions began in Atlanta at 1 percent of presentations, rose to 14 percent in Las Vegas, dropped to 6 percent in New Orleans, and continued the downward spiral to 3.5 percent in Pittsburgh. There is no reason why all contributed papers (21 percent of Pittsburgh presentations) could not be presented as posters. Furthermore, I suspect that many symposia (70.5 percent of Pittsburgh presentations) would work better as posters. The poster symposium I helped organize for the New

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Orleans meeting effectively conveyed multiple approaches to a problem and elicited useful comments. Our poster symposium also provided a ideal opportunity to promote advanced graduate students and their research. As an editor I see the potential for moving smoothly from a well-designed poster presentation to a published report.

There is another reason for encouraging posters. Archaeological research is easily, and often best, displayed graphically, yet photographs and figures seem to worsen as communication shifts to text and tables. I am surprised that the availability of computer graphics has not made posters the favored form of presentation at professional meetings. The quality of archaeological graphics must improve, and one way to do it is to practice with posters.

Poster sessions may not be the wonder cure for all that ails the annual meeting, but they do offer symptomatic relief of the most common complaints. Until posters are a prominent feature of annual meetings, I would suggest that those who have not participated in a poster session hold their peace.

J. Jefferson Reid
Editor

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