Paper from jailed professor stirs debate over publication

Montreal. A materials research journal has refused to publish a paper written by an engineer from the prison cell in which he is serving a life sentence — with no eligibility for parole for 25 years — for murdering four of his colleagues in 1992, stirring a controversy over whether the decision is an infringement of academic freedom.

The *International Journal of Solids and Structures* published an earlier article from Valery Fabrikant in January. But its editor, Charles Steele, a professor of applied mechanics at Stanford University, has now bowed to pressure from university staff and students, as well as the family of one of Fabrikant's victims, not to publish any more of his papers.

After Steele published Fabrikant's earlier paper, "A Solution to a Complex Problem on Cracks", he received a letter of protest from Frederick Lowy, rector of Montreal's Concordia University, and Donat Taddeo, its dean of engineering. Both argued that Fabrikant had forfeited his liberty, and with it the right to publish his academic views.

Steele admits that he has been "in a quandary" as to what action to take. Many of his colleagues advised him that it was correct to publish the second article, and he agrees that the article was "pretty sound". He concedes that his final decision was somewhat "arbitrary", and that he was swayed by objections from the family of one of Fabrikant's victims and from graduate students in his own faculty.

But Steele's action has come under fire from Margaret Somerville, director of the McGill University Centre for Medicine, Ethics and Law. "The best test of a society is how it treats its most despised members," she says.

Somerville argues that society should not allow an individual's crimes to influence judgements on the science produced by such individuals unless the two are directly related — as was the case of Nazi experiments on humans. "It's tremendously important that we don't start putting irrelevant characteristics in judging what we will and will not publish scientifically. The big question is: is what he did relevant to the scientific integrity of his work?"

Lowy and Taddeo, in their letter to Steele, also claimed that Fabrikant, whose ability to influence the opinions of others had been apparent both at the university and during his trial, might be trying to exploit the recognition conferred by scientific publication to improve his prospects for parole. But Somerville argues that the significance of published papers in terms of parole prospects is a matter for a parole board, not a journal editor.

Bernard Dickens, a professor of law at the University of Toronto who is attached to its Centre for Bioethics, agrees. "If the content of the article is sound, it should be published," he says. "It would be inconsistent with the goals of a university to attempt to suppress knowledge." **David Spurgeon**

Russian rescue effort nears polar scientists but faces icy barrier

St Petersburg. One hundred and twenty-two Russian polar explorers, who have been stranded in Antarctica for over a year and are down to their last stocks of food, could — weather and mechanical reliability permitting — soon be heading for home. The explorers' plight is the result of the Russian government's inability to pay for repairs to the ice-breaker that broke down three times on its way to rescue them.

The 'changing of the guard' in the Novolazarevskaya research station usually takes place three times each year — in December, February and once during the summer months. The Russian government maintains a fleet of ships that are used to deliver equipment, food and fuel, as well as a change of personnel. But for the past year, the government has only been able to pay for one ship, and has been unable to set aside funds to pay for repairs.

When the ship, the *Academician Fedorov*, broke down for the first time, it was taken to a dock in Germany for repairs, and was then duly impounded when the Russian Arctic and Antarctic Institute (AAI) was unable to foot the repair bill. The ship was eventually released in January, after the dockyard had secured half the repair costs, plus a promise that the remainder would eventually be paid.

The second breakdown occurred as soon as the ship had crossed the Equator. *Academician Fedorov* remained in Cape Town for three weeks while its engine underwent further repairs. After a third breakdown, the ship was directed to Buenos Aires, where repairs took a further month. The ship has now left the Argentine capital, and is on its way to the Novolazarevskaya polar station.

Even now, the success of its voyage is not guaranteed, as most of the favourable weather has been missed and the ship will have to cut through heavy Antarctic ice in the polar night. If conditions prove too difficult, the explorers will be evacuated by helicopter.

The explorers, meanwhile, are said to be bearing up well, but they have stopped all scientific activity. Food stocks are low, and fuel is expected to last two to three weeks, according to Arkadyi Soshnikov, director of the AAI. But, he says, the researchers are not panicking. "They took part in a recent poll to elect a governor for St Petersburg, and are making preparations for voting in the Russian presidential elections on 16 June."

Carl Levitin

Universities charge for Internet access

San Francisco. Californian colleges and universities have begun to charge faculty members and students for external access to the Internet. They say the move has been made necessary by unmanageable growth in the volume of on-line traffic, and the resulting increased costs (see *Nature* **380**, 377; 1996).

Almost two-thirds of traffic on the University of California's campus networks is now caused by students and staff dialling in from off-campus locations. As a result, links have become congested and slow, while lines are often engaged. Much of the increase in traffic is due to a shift in Internet use from educational and research purposes to entertainment and other activities, in particular using the World Wide Web.

For students and faculty members at the University of California at Berkeley, for example, such dial-in connections are no longer free, with users now being

required to pay \$10 a month to a commercial Internet service provider (the service will remain free on campus). Other UC campuses and California state universities are beginning to follow suit.

Stuart Lynn, associate vice-president for information resources and communications for the University of California's Office of the President, says the increasing demand had made it impossible for the university to continue providing the service free. Other universities across the United States, including Cornell University, have taken similar action, he says.

The university says it has received few complaints about its new policy. But it admits some academics have expressed concern about the weakening of the tradition of free access to information and educational tools, and have been warning against the gradual invasion of commercialism into collegial values and the sharing of information. **Sally Lehrman**