Science and the media

David Fishlock, Science Editor of the *Financial Times*, looks at two recent publications* on a controversial relationship

SOME YEARS ago, while writing a science feature for a daily newspaper, I was advised by one scientist to ring up another for help on one specific point. But the professor in question, unknown to me, was not willing to talk on the 'phone and suggested I write. I said—perhaps impatiently—that I wanted to develop and verify the point right away and “can't wait three months for a reply”. The professor would not budge but did ring my Editor to complain about my “rudeness”.

A year or two later I met the professor at a Press conference called by her university to discuss the results of Government-sponsored work in which she had been closely involved. On that occasion she was helpful on everything connected with the Government-funded part of the work, but could not be drawn at all on the (very considerable) commercial implications of her university research. It turned out that she was also advising a large private company.

The readiness with which this university scientist was willing to place part of her knowledge and experience beyond the reach of the public (including her fellow scientists) is a good illustration of the scope for confusion about the respective roles of scientist and journalist. For those scientists who are interested in what the Press and broadcasting channels do with science—and there can be few research workers in these straitened times so unworldly as to be indifferent to the media's activities—these two short books, of identical title, offer a valuable grounding. One is the report of a joint scientist-journalist study group set up by the British Association (BA); the other, a contribution to OUP's excellent Science and Engineering Policy series.

The BA report deals specifically with the quality of the presentation of science subjects to a wider public, improvement in which the BA believes calls for “a much closer relationship between scientists and journalists than exists generally today”. It acknowledges that “several factors limit the frankness between scientist and journalist”, among them contractual obligations and fears that the informa-

tion may be over-dramatised. “It is not that he mistrusts the good science correspondent, who can be expected to present issues in a fair and balanced way, but that he fears any airing in the media runs the risk that the story will be taken up, sensationalised and distorted by others”.

In 16 pages the BA report sets out very lucidly what the science journalist or broadcaster is trying to do, and why, what handicaps he must work under, and why he is so dependent upon the cooperation of scientists—and good scientists to boot. It has a salutary word of warning about “scientists, mostly with a gift for entertaining the public, who are tempted to exploit the media for personal reasons”, and whose ability to dazzle a non-scientific audience may lead them to make “wild and reckless statements”. It advises the media to be as wary of such scientists as they are of political adventurers. The corollary of course, is that if the genuine scientist will not help the journalist, he may well be tempted to make greater use of charlatans.

The BA study also touches upon the so-called growing public disenchantment with science, evidence for which it finds is thin. But it suggests that some journalists who believe in it allow their writing to reflect hostility towards science, and thus help to foster hostility between the public and science.

Dr Peter Farago's book covers broadly the same territory at about five times the length. The author is a scientist who edits technical journals and who thus has a toe in both camps. He tends to take a gloomier view of relations between scientists and journalists than the BA working party, which seems to reflect the views of those science correspondents on whom he has relied for first-hand experience of the craft. “The need for scientists to explain was a constant accompaniment to all discussions, together with the hurt accusation that they will not be properly questioned by reporters”.

Farago notes that only one newspaper in Britain carries a daily item on science. This is the *Nature-Times* Science Report, modelled on the paper's famous Law Reports, from which I once culled a painfully funny item entitled “Raving and gobbling”. There is little danger, however, of anyone doing himself an injury while reading one of its science reports, which are workmanlike but quite uninspired precis of, usually, original scientific papers, tucked away in a “ghetto” at

the back of the paper and the bottom of the page.

The *Nature-Times* Science Report is a good illustration of some of the major faults and failings of science writing and attitudes towards it today. It is “ghetto journalism” inasmuch as it caters for a select group of readers. Farago found no one on newspapers who found the reports readable—a strong condemnation of any regular newspaper item. They cry out for the touch of a sympathetic editor who knows how to write a good headline, how to inject some flair into the flat prose—all of which can be done, I should assure the purists, without distorting the facts.

But all the skills of the most sympathetic sub-editor could not overcome the handicap of having a guaranteed if inconspicuous place in the paper each day, which insulates it from the need to compete for space and attention. As a consequence it becomes isolated from the substance of all other reporting, no longer part of the fabric of everyday news. This may even redound in attitudes towards other science stories which get less attention because the paper thinks it is already doing its duty towards science by allocating a corner each day.

Neither of these two studies reach any very profound conclusions. They agree that science writing can be very good but often is not, and that it would probably be in everyone's interest if scientists and those who write about their work were to take a more sympathetic view of each other's activities. The seven conclusions set out in the BA report offer sensible advice for improving relations, and include the idea of more closely studying just what the public knows and thinks about science and where its ideas are coming from. □

**Science and the Media*. (British Association Publication 76/1: London, March 1976).

Science and the Media. (Science and Engineering Policy Series.) By Peter Farago. Pp. 95. (Oxford University: London, April 1976).