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Science in the Public Press

THE desirability of promoting a more intelligent and more intelligible consideration of scientific work and thought in the public Press has often been urged in these columns; and there are signs of increased attention to this need both from newspaper editors and from scientific workers. This is due to several causes. The public expenditure upon scientific research is now large. Government departments which spend money on research, and scientific workers who are supported by public money, feel that the public should understand the value of the work it is supporting. This motive of social self-justification penetrates far more extensively than is generally realized. The Department of Scientific and Industrial Research and the University Grants Committee provide funds which assist a large fraction of all the scientific research at present done in Great Britain.

The circumstances of scientific research in this country have undergone a profound change during the last fifty years. In the nineteenth century, the leaders of research did not consider that social justification of their work was necessary. Providence had placed them in fortunate situations where they were able to indulge their personal intellectual tastes, and though their labours might be of practical value to humanity, or profitable to themselves, this was regarded as a happy accident. They considered that the receipt of a comfortable academic salary or private income did not lay any very pressing obligation on them to use their talents for the extension of scientific knowledge to the community. This attitude was derived from an earlier stage of civilization, when humanity was forced to admire those who could exact support without rendering any corresponding service.

The Greeks despised Archimedes' contributions to mechanics because manual skill in a slave State was disreputable. Until recently a large part of scientific research was done by persons enjoying academic endowments or private fortunes. As they were not directly dependent on the public, they did not see why they should explain what they were doing. In extreme cases, such as that of Henry Cavendish, they did not explain what they were doing even to their friends. A scientific worker in direct receipt of a subsidy cannot reasonably adopt this attitude.

The policy adopted by large industrial corporations of supporting research in order to invent valuable new processes has provided another motive for the extension of public interest in science. Many corporations systematically publish accounts of their researches, partly as a form of advertisement to show their progressive character. They are interested in securing as much public discussion as possible of the scientific principles connected with the goods they wish to sell. In the United States especially, a large amount of advertisement is designed to appeal to the scientific interests of consumers.

The rapid increase in the number of scientific inventions, such as radio, aeroplanes, synthetic plastics, and thousands of other modern objects, attracts the scientific curiosity of the public. In addition, there are the results of decades of the teaching of science in schools, and the spread of the conviction that science is the chief characteristic of the present age. It can scarcely be admitted, however, that the present age is scientific, though science may be prominent in it. Indeed, the development of science throws into greater contrast the unscientific nature of the greater part of modern life. Nothing could be more unscientific

than the contemporary armaments race, and the existence of widespread poverty and malnutrition in a period of unparalleled development of the technique of production, and the study of the science of nutrition. An increasing number of citizens are looking to the public Press for explanations of these paradoxes.

It is not necessary to enumerate more reasons why the demand for news and information of science in the Press is increasing. The fact is known to every newspaper editor. Some are puzzled by it, and accept it merely on business grounds. Recent questionnaires on the popularity of different types of articles have shown that scientific articles are more popular than many editors with a literary training had believed.

While nearly everyone admits the increasing demand for news of science, there is general agreement that the demand is not being met satisfactorily. Scientific workers are irritated by inaccurate Press accounts of their activities, and the public is unable to hear of many matters it would like to know. Better methods of handling science in the Press are required. For various reasons the problem is difficult. The mere technical difficulty of explaining science in a style suitable for a newspaper, and yet not obnoxious to men of science, is considerable. The difficulty of popularization is generally underrated. Good popularization requires a breadth of culture in the writer which is not very common among scientific workers, or any section of the population. Few men of science are immediately capable of writing for the Press. In fact, it may be confidently asserted that it is more difficult to earn £300 per annum in writing satisfactory scientific articles for the Press than to earn an equal sum as a research worker. This is one of the explanations why so much newspaper matter relating to science is so bad.

The poor financial rewards of scientific journalism have repelled most able men from the work. The field has been left to a small group which contains an exceptionally large percentage of writers who, for one reason or another, do not fit in very well with the usual professions, where equivalent qualifications can usually command an income of £750 a year in an academic or industrial post. Until newspapers are prepared to pay such a salary for a full-time science editor, they will remain without a representative of science with standing equal to that of a literary editor. The problem is thus, to a large extent, economic.

The creation of a science news agency, like Science Service in the United States, seems to be a more immediately practicable, though less ideal, solution. But there are serious difficulties in creating such a service. The Press includes journals conducted on very different principles, and with very different points of view. The technique of writing for different types of journal varies greatly. Some writers are brilliantly successful with one type of journal, and are complete failures with others. Newspapers are very competitive. Editors in Great Britain always like to have some individuality or exclusiveness in their copy: they use matter from the Press agencies only when they are unable to get special material of their own. Thus a news service tends to start with the neutral characteristics of a stop-gap organization. But though there are difficulties confronting the establishment of a science news service, such a service is particularly necessary in the absence of adequate science reports in the Press, and will always have a useful function, for the same reasons which keep the various general Press agencies in vigorous existence.

Assuming that a science news service is desirable, the next point to decide is how it may best be organized. It would be wise to be clear from the beginning who should control the service. Should the predominance of the control be with science, or with the Press? Different answers might be given to this question in different countries and circumstances. There is little doubt that in Great Britain final control should at the beginning rest with representatives of science. The organizers of such a service should seek endowments from societies and individuals, and the control should be through a committee of eminent men of science. A staff of two or three scientific journalists, whose various styles will roughly suit the various types of journal, should be appointed. A sum of £25,000, or an endowment of £3,000 a year for ten years, might be sufficient for starting the organization under conditions that might lead to great and valuable success. The payment of fairly secure and satisfactory salaries would do much to attract able men to the staff of the service. Until this is done, the presentation of science in the public Press will not be improved, because the sort of ability necessary to solve the problems of the collection and presentation of science news will be much better paid in other fields of work.