

they can do on their own account. Indeed, in the immediate future perhaps the greatest part they have to play is that of keeping their members informed of the progress in new techniques of documentation, storage and retrieval. Unhappily there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the scientific community is not yet aware of the advantages, and even of the dangers, which such new techniques have created.

SYMPOSIUM VOLUMES

WHAT is the future for the proceedings of symposia? For a decade now, a great many conferences and large symposia have been followed—at intervals of a few months or even a few years—by the appearance of a volume in which is collected the principal contributions. And just as the numbers of conferences have been increasing, so too has increased the flow of symposium proceedings. Although, in the past year or so, there have been signs that this flood of publications has been beginning to diminish, it is by no means clear what place symposium volumes will occupy in the scientific literature in the years ahead.

The defects of published symposium proceedings are easily spelt out. They tend, for one thing, to be late. Inevitably an editor or a team of editors must be in great difficulties to persuade all speakers at a large gathering to deliver their manuscripts in time for rapid publication. One or two black sheep can hold up publication for months on end. And then, of course, the production of books is necessarily slower than that of journals—especially when publishers, quite understandably, tend to put symposium volumes near the bottom of the priority queue. But these are merely practical snags which might be got round by rewarding editors of symposium volumes more handsomely. The more serious defect is that the material delivered at conferences, chosen as it must be to inform the audience and to provide background information as well as news of discoveries, must necessarily repeat material elsewhere in the literature. If to this objection is added the complaint that many symposium volumes are not adequately supplied with references and that many of them contain contributions which would not have been approved of by competent referees, and that it is often extremely difficult to retrieve information buried in the symposium volumes, it is no wonder that librarians and the scientists who advise them are often hard pressed to know whether funds should be spent on these productions.

The other side of the coin is also familiar. For one thing, many symposium volumes are eminently valuable as reference books and even as volumes which provide authoritative surveys of developing subjects. The records of the Ciba Foundation and the Cold Spring Harbor symposia are now well known; their virtues stem from the care with which they are edited, and there have in recent years been many symposia the proceedings of which were of such historic importance that some record of them becomes of lasting value.

The difficulty here, of course, is that it is often impossible to predict in advance which symposia will really deserve to be recorded for posterity and, in any case, the organizers are often too involved to make an objective judgment. Indeed, there is a natural, if reprehensible, tendency for those who organize conferences to consider that they have by that means established a prominent claim to public attention.

If, as there is some evidence to suggest, librarians are now turning against symposium volumes, the pressures to decide more soberly what should be done about them will be greater. One solution, advocated by the National Federation for Documentation in 1962, is that symposium proceedings should be published in ordinary journals and not as separate proceedings. Occasionally this would be a valuable thing to do, and the Royal Society is only one of many learned societies which have recently taken this good advice. But to suggest that all symposium proceedings should be published in the journals would merely transfer from one place to another the problem of how to be more discriminating in what is published and how to reduce the bulk of it. Merely to advise means of producing symposium volumes more quickly would remove one of the more obvious defects of the present arrangement but might actually aggravate the problems of discrimination in bulk, so what alternatives can be urged on organizers of symposia and their publishers? It would be valuable to see whether the euphoric conviction there tends to be at the end of conferences that the rest of the world should be quickly told what has been happening could be most constructively gratified by the appearance of objective but detailed reports of what has occurred, but such a course would only be acceptable if somewhere in the process of publication there intervened decisively some means of singling out the important contributions from those whose interest outside the conference halls is less for one reason or another. The symposium organizers or publishers would have to make valid judgments about individual contributions and there would inevitably be the risk that feelings might be hurt. But this, alas, is an inescapable part of the process of publication. And it is not only publishers but readers who are always saying that one thing is more interesting than another. The moral is that symposium organizers should acknowledge that if they want to publish they must also be prepared to discriminate between what is valuable and what is not, or to allow some person from outside to do the job on their behalf. They should also, of course, remember more vividly than they do at present that the special value of conferences and symposia is that they bring people together in ways which permit informal exchanges of ideas and information. One of the saddest characteristics of the flood of symposium volumes in recent years is the sure knowledge that the scientific contributions they contain have often been mere facades of exposition, behind which the real excitement of the proceedings has been concealed.