

# Science in the public eye

Dorothy Nelkin

**Making Science Our Own.** By Marcel C. LaFollette. *University of Chicago Press: 1990.* Pp. 260. Hbk. £35.95, \$51.75, pbk £14.75, \$20.75.

SCIENTISTS, these days, feel besieged. They face reduced public funding, accusations of fraud, and animal-rights protests. They compete with burgeoning social movements based on New Age philosophies and belief in holistic medicine that seem to reject the very essence of scientific thinking. The belief in progress that has long sustained large-scale support of science appears to be in decline, as new research projects confront public scepticism, if not explicit opposition.

Marcel LaFollette's *Making Science Our Own* is the latest in a number of books on science journalism that have recognized the growing tension in the relationships between science and society, and have explored the role of media images in explaining public attitudes. Arguing that the tensions between science and society reflect "images of science widely shared by American citizens throughout the century", LaFollette explores these shared images by examining the content of science articles in eleven popular US magazines from 1910 to the mid-1950s. She sees these magazines, accessible to millions of readers, as "representative of the content of all the mass media and as a measure of public sentiments".

In her engaging book, LaFollette reviews the images of science that seem to recur in the history of science popularization and reporting. They are highly stereotyped: science is an independent, unstoppable force; scientists are "male, white, brilliant, energetic, rational and dispassionate"; research inevitably leads to progress. But she also finds many contradictory images. Science appears in popular magazines as critically important to society, yet quite distant from public comprehension. New discoveries foster enormous expectations, yet they are also a source of fear and mistrust. Science writers convey an uneasiness with unchecked scientific growth, but also the sense that externally imposed restriction would have disastrous consequences. LaFollette describes how the popular magazines in the early twentieth century fuelled public expectations about the benefits of science with extravagant promises: cures for cancer, synthetic food to eliminate world starvation,

control over weather or unending sources of energy through nuclear power. But she also conveys their critical message that science could be destructive — a threat to religion and to fundamental human values.

Her documentation is often amusing and very familiar to contemporary media-watchers. LaFollette contrasts the media praise of "the men of science" (curious, dispassionate, burning the midnight

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oil) with the condescension towards the few women in the laboratories (domestic, devoted to family and children) and the objects of condescension by the media.

oil) with the condescension towards the few women in the laboratories (domestic, devoted to family and children). Although she does not provide contemporary examples, such images persist. Just as a profile of Margaret Mead written in 1935 described how the anthropologist could make "corn fritters with crocodile eggs", so an article about Barbara McClintock written in 1983 has her "baking with black walnuts". Just as news articles in the 1930s created extravagant expectations about the promises of nuclear power, so the press in the 1980s promised wonders from cold fusion. Issues of secrecy, regulation and the high cost of science debated in the early part of the century still pre-occupy the press today. LaFollette's point about the importance of shared images would have been strengthened by more explicit comparisons with the content of current science reporting, for there are interesting and revealing continuities

that would buttress her argument.

The claim that public ambivalence towards science is rooted in the history of media images, however, rests on an important but not obvious assumption — that the media have a significant influence on public attitudes. LaFollette seems to accept the common response of scientists who tend to "blame the messenger" whenever there is criticism of science. Many scientists believe that the media are responsible for negative public attitudes towards science, that the tension between science and society reflects the poor public understanding of science, and that an adequately informed public would share the enthusiasm of scientists themselves. Thus, they try through public relations to convince journalists to project a more favourable public image. But this belief

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oversimplifies the complexities of public attitudes towards science, and underestimates the importance of pre-existing attitudes in shaping readers' interpretation of media images. Also, for many magazine readers science articles are little more than a form of entertainment.

LaFollette appropriately observes that the scientific community has to some extent encouraged the tension between science and society through its own efforts to popularize and promote research by making extravagant claims. These efforts continue today and, indeed, have been formalized and extended with the expansion of public relations in science. The result is more promises, greater expectations and increased possibilities for disillusionment.

In her last chapter, the author describes both the changes and continuities in media coverage and in public attitudes towards science since 1955. But she stops short of analysing the nature of these changes, their sources in the changing social context of science and their significance. Nevertheless, this is an engaging and readable book that provides a wealth of material for those interested in the history of journalism and in the background of current public attitudes towards science. LaFollette concludes with the optimistic prediction that "a new generation of science communicators and journalists, alert to the moral, economic, and political implications of research, may succeed in conveying a realistic image . . .". But the material actually presented inspires this reader to say *plus ça change*. □

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