

GENERAL SCIENCE

Pressures for Publicity

Press conferences and cocktail parties, devices that sell products and glorify politicians, have been adopted to obtain scientific publicity; some newspapers have resisted the pressure.

► THE SKILLS and the science of influencing and controlling human behavior are widely used in selling goods.

The Madison Avenue approach benefits from the psychological discoveries made by professors and researchers. Just as atomic energy may be used for peaceful purposes or for war, so the new methods of persuading people to do things can be used for both good and evil.

The methods of obtaining publicity that work for selling products or glorifying politicians have been adopted and applied to making available to the public the results of scientific and medical research.

Press conferences and cocktail parties are devices adopted for the purpose of obtaining scientific publicity. Representatives of industrial concerns, particularly, seem to think that supplying science reporters with liquor or arranging pleasing junkets out of the office is an effective way of getting publicity. Perhaps it is, but there has been a reaction against succumbing to such blandishments.

The cocktail party or the junket can be a form of bribery, although the public relations boys will deny this vehemently. Obviously, if any science reporter is going to sell out to public relations, the price will have to be considerably higher than a few dollars for cocktails, dinners and airplane fares.

Some newspapers have covered these

PR events but they have insisted upon paying the way of their representatives; others have felt that their reporters are strong enough in ethics to withstand any temptation and bias.

At times the pressure is in the other direction. For instance, because this is "cancer month," the American Cancer Society brought together at La Jolla, Calif., in a plush beach situation, 50 of the "most eminent, productive and articulate scientists in basic and clinical research."

Newspapers and press associations were invited to send reporters and science writers to cover this event. It probably cost each of the reporters or their publications something like \$500 for each session, if the reporter came from the East Coast. Perhaps the reports from this make-news conference were worth that, but it was a publicity-seeking attempt and coverage of it by newspapers should be done with eyes open.

Important developments in cancer should be announced in scientific journals or professional meetings.

Another technique of publicity is the issuance of material under a release date, which, even though the information is not too new and pertinent, forces the science writer or editor to give more attention than he would otherwise to an announcement for fear that other newspapers will issue a report and he will be left in the lurch.

• Science News Letter, 83:228 April 13, 1963

TECHNOLOGY

Computer That Reads

► COMPUTERS can be taught to "read" hand-printed capital letters, Frank P. Kuhl Jr. of Sperry Gyroscope Company, Great Neck, N. Y., reported in New York.

The method used reduces English letters to a computer's normal diet of numbers. It was 100% accurate in a test series using a standard computer and letters written by different persons in varying styles.

For the test run, the letters were changed to numbers by hand, but automatic devices to make the transfer are available. The system is mostly independent of the letter's size, style, tilt, thickness and position on the paper.

The computer is taught how to recognize the contours of the letter, its free ends, and the presence or absence of sharp angles, Mr. Kuhl told the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers.

A code with numbers standing for the directions a letter's outer contour may follow is first established, then the alphabet is reconstructed using the code. The code

itself comes from dividing a square into eight equal parts, then numbering the lines that divide each of the pieces.

A capital letter is then drawn on a piece of graph paper and its contour described according to the code. In an automatic system, a spot of light might follow the letter's contour, recording which of the numbers its direction comes closest to at specified intervals.

Thus, an approximation of the letter "C" becomes a series of numbers—2345566677-0004443322211076—or a somewhat similar series depending on the style of the letter. The presence or absence of a sharp angle is used to discriminate between letters such as U and V or D and O.

Although this may seem like a difficult way to think of a letter, it is not, since a computer deals with the numbers almost instantaneously. However, its does require an exact representation in its "memory" to recognize a letter, which Mr. Kuhl's system gives with sufficient accuracy.

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Questions

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GENERAL SCIENCE—How much will major metal needs increase in the United States by the year 2000? p. 227.

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MEDICINE—How many people in the U.S. are affected by histoplasmosis? p. 230.

PHYSICS—What happens in liquids agitated with ultrasonic sound? p. 234.

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