

Commentary

Some personal thoughts and reflections on science journalism and on Science News

This coming week marks the 50th anniversary of SCIENCE NEWS. It would be appropriate, and undoubtedly fascinating, to review the eventful half century since publication of the first issue (then titled SCIENCE NEWS-LETTER) on March 13, 1922. During the coming year we may have an opportunity to do so.

For now, I want to share some thoughts with you about what SCIENCE NEWS is today. How is it changing? What do we consider its role and purpose in the 1970's? As the only weekly newsmagazine of science in the United States intended for both professionals and laymen, SCIENCE NEWS's central function is to provide well-rounded news coverage and intelligent discussion of advances in science and of important public issues of science and society.

Despite its long history, SCIENCE NEWS is a young and evolving magazine. Readers of long standing will have noted considerable change since 1966 when the name SCIENCE NEWS was adopted, and the process continues. We have in the last year, for instance, made a conscious effort to develop a more literate and lively writing style. We have made several changes in layout and design to improve readability and to provide a greater sense of order and unity to the magazine. But a publication should be rated on what it says, not on how it says it or on how it appears, and to understand trends in editorial content requires reflection on how society has changed.

The traditional function of science journalism has been to report and interpret scientific advances. In this role, the science writer shares with the research scientist important qualities: a love of knowledge and ideas, an appreciation of the mystery and beauty of the natural world, a commitment to seek understanding, and a desire to share the results of that quest with others. It is a noble and, in these terms, even a romantic calling. SCIENCE NEWS, in my view, has long excelled in this capacity. Several points about our approach are evident. We emphasize news at the frontiers of science, areas of ferment in which gains of significance and interest are being made. We try to write at a level readable by a sophisticated lay audience and yet still comfortable and informative to professionals in science. We strive to place news of scientific advances within the context of related scientific work. And on all claims of scientific advances likely to be of long-term importance, we make a special effort to obtain critical outside opinion and comment, and to include it in our articles. In this way we hope not only to obtain and convey a more rounded view of the validity of the work we report on but also to portray a truer and more realistic view of the nature of the scientific process: a series of small, uncertain steps, each of which is subjected to the buffeting winds of contrary fact and opinion.

SCIENCE NEWS maintains its strong commitment to be enterprising and aggressive in reporting the results of scientific work.

But as is obvious to all, the world is more complex than it used to be. A journalism that reports scientific advances without reporting on the public issues associated with those advances would be remiss in its duty. Good scientific journalism has always considered the implications of science. But the way in which so many aspects of science affect everyday life, the awesome capabilities that some areas of science have now attained, the currents of social change that have swept across and altered the nation and the world in the past decade, and the fact that the scientific enterprise in the United States is in large part (\$17 billion a year) supported by the American taxpayer, make even more essential today a full examination of the political, social and ethical issues of science and of the means by which the results of science are applied for the good of society. This is an area of great activity and ferment in science journalism today. It is an area to which in recent years SCIENCE NEWS, along with other publications, has been giving increased attention. The process is imperfect, but well-meaning persons cannot doubt that it is in the public interest to help illuminate problems related to science and society. To do so obviously does not imply the taking of any political or partisan stance. It does require the effort to seek out and air the diverse views of those who may contribute to the solution, or at least a better understanding, of problems in which science may be involved. It also requires a willingness to examine the performance of public and private institutions that influence the directions of science (construed in its broadest sense) and the perception to question long-held assumptions that may retard social progress. This thoughtful, and I hope insightful, approach is part of the reporting process at SCIENCE NEWS. And this reporting process is in turn only part of the larger democratic process, which holds that well-informed citizens are better able to influence the decisions that affect their life and well being.

These, then, are the two sides of SCIENCE NEWS. In one we report the substantive results of science; in the other we examine the relationships between science and the world today. (We recognize, of course, that the two aspects are not all that neat and separate. Both are frequently at work in the same article.) Whatever the subject, we hope, by applying the principles of responsible and vital journalism, to bring to you a view of science that is at once interesting, challenging and thought-provoking and that indirectly makes at least some modest contribution to the betterment of the world we all live in. □

—KENDRICK FRAZIER