

# SCIENCE NEWS®

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## OF THE WEEK

|                                  |     |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| Approaching breakeven for fusion | 364 |
| First infrared spectrogram       | 365 |
| Laser-enriched uranium           | 365 |
| Asilomar conference report       | 366 |
| A metallic polymer               | 366 |
| Dawn of a baby whooping crane    | 367 |
| Prediction for Halley's comet    | 367 |
| Jupiter's 13th moon              | 367 |

## RESEARCH NOTES

|                  |     |
|------------------|-----|
| Space Sciences   | 368 |
| Natural Sciences | 368 |
| Energy           | 369 |
| Agriculture      | 369 |

## ARTICLES

|                             |     |
|-----------------------------|-----|
| Scientists in the spotlight | 370 |
|-----------------------------|-----|

## DEPARTMENTS

|         |     |
|---------|-----|
| Books   | 362 |
| Letters | 373 |

**COVER:** Ehrlich, Shockley, Commoner, Pauling, Seaborg, Mead, Skinner—household names from the scientific world. How and why do a certain few scientists get into the public eye, and what effect does this "visibility" have on science and the public understanding of science? See p. 370. (Illustration: Mary Hartman)

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## Spotlight on the Visible Scientists

Some scientists, like some politicians, seem to be in the news and in the public eye far more than others. Rae Goodell's study of "The Visible Scientists," reported on in this issue, is an important and fascinating analysis of this phenomenon. It has long been needed.

The visible scientists are outspoken, issue-oriented, colorful, controversy-prone and articulate. In newspaper terms, they make "good copy." They are, almost to a person, excellent communicators before audiences and in their writings. This may not seem surprising, yet it contrasts sharply with the conventional, time-honored image of scientists. Indeed, the fact that these characteristics distinguish them from their scientific colleagues amplifies their visibility even more.

As Goodell points out, the ease with which the visible scientists interact with the media is both an advantage and a source of uneasiness to science reporters. It is the uneasy feelings that I want to discuss briefly here. There is legitimate concern whether the visible scientists, with their special skills, and often for quite respectable causes, unduly influence the amount and balance of coverage in favor of their positions on issues of science, technology and society. There are strong arguments either way. It is a complex topic. Goodell has a section on the subject in her 437-page manuscript which, when published, should be read by all who are interested in relationships between science and the public. In any case, the public interest is served when gatekeepers of the media ask themselves whether the views of a "visible scientist" are featured because they are broadly representative of the scientific community or merely because the visible scientist is more accessible and more articulate than other scientists with perhaps different views.

Without quite consciously thinking of it in those terms, we at SCIENCE NEWS have tried to exercise discretion and judgment regarding news made by the visible scientists. For us, this task is much easier than for our colleagues in newspaper science writing. We have the luxury of a scientifically oriented readership who are more strongly interested in the substance of science news than is a newspaper audience. This allows us to give more attention to scientific content than to personalities or opinion. Newspapers and television still rely heavily on what in the trade are called "he said" stories—news articles based mainly on the statements of newsworthy persons rather than on independent analysis of the facts. The visible scientists are perfect for these kinds of stories.

Out of curiosity, we went back through the cumulative card-file index of SCIENCE NEWS (1962 to present) to find how many times we have had stories featuring each of the 39 visible scientists of Goodell's study. Here are the figures:

|                   |    |                    |    |                    |   |
|-------------------|----|--------------------|----|--------------------|---|
| Louis S.B. Leakey | 23 | Fred Hoyle         | 13 | Christiaan Barnard | 7 |
| Carl Sagan        | 21 | Margaret Mead      | 13 | Frank J. Rauscher  | 7 |
| Glenn Seaborg     | 21 | Barry Commoner     | 12 | Ralph Lapp         | 6 |
| Philip Handler    | 20 | Joshua Lederberg   | 12 | John Gofman        | 6 |
| Edward Teller     | 17 | Edward David Jr.   | 12 | George Wald        | 5 |
| Jerome Wiesner    | 17 | Linus Pauling      | 12 | Paul Dudley White  | 5 |
| Michael DeBakey   | 15 | William Shockley   | 10 | Karl Menninger     | 5 |
| B. F. Skinner     | 14 | John Foster        | 10 | Paul Ehrlich       | 4 |
| James Watson      | 14 | Jean Mayer         | 10 | Wernher von Braun  | 4 |
| Philip Abelson    | 14 | René Dubos         | 9  | Hyman G. Rickover  | 4 |
| Albert Sabin      | 14 | Daniel P. Moynihan | 9  | Noam Chomsky       | 1 |
| Harold Urey       | 14 | Denton Cooley      | 8  | Isaac Asimov       | 1 |
| Edwin Land        | 13 | Jonas Salk         | 8  | Benjamin Spock     | 0 |

The differences in rank are interesting. Some of the scientists high on her list (left column of table on p. 371), are low on our list (Paul Ehrlich), and vice versa. In general, it appears to me that we have tended to mention more often those visible scientists who are prominent more for their scientific work (the late Louis Leakey heads our list, for example) than for their social and political views. We didn't do a full analysis of scientists *not* on her list who may have been "visible" in SCIENCE NEWS, but one, Norman Borlaug, was mentioned in SN four times in one six-month period alone (July-December 1974).

Many of the visible scientists in Goodell's study are national treasures, remarkable for their intellectual energy, wisdom and insight. Their contributions to science, in the very broadest sense, and to a better public understanding of ourselves and our world have been enormous. A few others sometimes have stretched facts to fit their convictions and thus diminished valuable aspects of the scientific tradition.

To check against abuses, Goodell echoes a suggestion made three years ago by one of the visible scientists—Jean Mayer—that scientists making public statements should clearly state whether they are speaking as a scientist or as a concerned citizen expressing a personal opinion. I always thought that idea had merit, but I now see little hope for its being widely accepted by the cause-oriented visible scientists, who tend to see their role as scientists and as involved citizens as one and the same.

—Kendrick Frazier