

From News Wire to Newsweekly 75 years of Science Service

By ANNA MARIA GILLIS

Week in and week out for 75 years, Science Service has delivered news about scientific discoveries and happenings to subscribers' doors, first through SCIENCE NEWS LETTER and more recently via SCIENCE NEWS. Its wide-ranging coverage provides an accurate barometer of scientific interests and concerns during those years.

"Use of Pneumonia Vaccine Still in Experimental Stage" shared the first issue, on March 13, 1922, with articles reporting the government's first allocation of radio wavelengths. In 1926, "Returning Elgin Marbles to Athens Argued" made the news. "Smears Endanger Nation" reported physicists' concerns in 1948 that the Communist-hunting tactics of the House Un-American Activities Committee threatened atomic energy research. A lead story in January 1996 hailed the discovery of two previously unseen planets.

The initial mission of Science Service, however, was not to publish a magazine but to provide a science news service for daily newspapers.

When newspaperman E.W. Scripps provided the seed money for Science Service in 1920, he intended to fund an organization that would provide accurate, timely research news to counter the sensationalism and superstition that passed for science reporting at the time. He believed that democracy would be safe only if the electorate understood science.

In a 1919 memo now at the Smithsonian Archives in Washington, D.C., Scripps said that the mission of the American Society for the Dissemination of Science (as he called what would become Science Service) should be the "reverse of propaganda. . . . Its objects should never be to furnish argument or facts for the purpose of producing partisans for any particular cause." That lofty goal was later modified slightly. A report in a 1921 issue of SCIENCE announced that the new organization "will not indulge in propaganda unless it be propaganda to urge the value of research and the usefulness of science."

Scripps entrusted the task of finding researchers, scientific societies, and journalists who would cooperate in the venture to his friend William Ritter, a University of California zoologist. Ritter viewed Science Service as a means of building financial support for science and encouraging the "mental attitude of science" among newspaper readers.

He quickly received help from the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the National Academy of Sciences, the National Research Council, and many leading scientists, including A.A. Noyes, R.A. Millikan, and R.M. Yerkes. The first board of Science Service was made up of 15 scientists and 5 journalists.

Ritter was instrumental in hiring Edwin Slosson as the service's first editor. Slosson had a Ph.D. in chemistry and years of experience as a literary editor. His job at Science Service, said Slosson, was to "keep on the lookout for new movements in the various sciences for the press, to get the press the first

news of important discoveries or at least the first authoritative explanation of their significance, [and] to hunt up and cultivate young writers of promise." Subsequent editors have retained those goals.

Among Slosson's early hires was 25-year-old Watson Davis, a civil engineer turned journalist who was reportedly waiting to ask the new editor for a position on Jan. 1, 1921, Slosson's first day on the job. Davis became managing editor shortly thereafter, and the next year, Slosson told the board that Davis "had worked up by himself a scientific column in the Washington Herald and is remarkably successful in extracting material out of more or less reluctant scientists and getting it into a shape so that it will be taken by more or less reluctant editors."

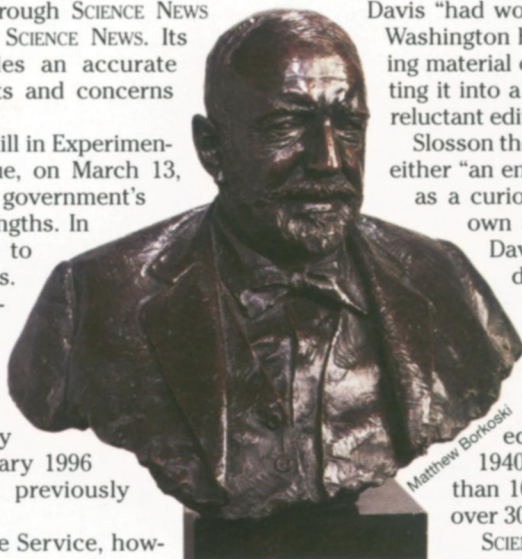
Slosson thought the popular press portrayed scientists as either "an enemy of society inventing infernal machines, or as a curious, half-crazy creature talking a jargon of his own and absorbed in pursuit of futilities." He and Davis worked tirelessly to change this perception, distributing the SCIENCE NEWS BULLETIN to newspaper clients.

The bulletin, which had started as a weekly service, became a daily offering in September 1922. In 1933, the Carnegie Corporation credited Science Service with convincing U.S. editors that readers wanted science. By the 1940s, Science Service materials appeared in more than 100 newspapers with a combined circulation of over 30 million readers.

SCIENCE NEWS LETTER billed itself as "a weekly summary of current science for personal use or use in classes, study clubs, or libraries." Much of the information that appeared in the early issues was recycled from material that had been sent to newspapers and magazines. The impetus for starting a publication for nonjournalists may have come from Ritter, who in 1921 wrote Slosson that his research colleagues wanted to know whether their library could have a copy of the bulletin that went out to journalists.

Individual subscriptions to SCIENCE NEWS LETTER started at \$5 per year, much less than the \$2 to \$5 per week charged newspapers, but individuals were not allowed to reproduce stories. Scripps had made it clear that the service had to become self-supporting quickly, because "no one—and least of all the editor or publisher of a paper—values anything that costs nothing." Slosson viewed SCIENCE NEWS LETTER as a "promising development" that "may develop into some sort of science newspaper which would be altogether different from our syndicated service and attract a large number of individual subscribers."

In its early days, Science Service did not always display the objectivity so prized in journalism today. The service clearly



Bronze of E.W. Scripps
by Jo Davidson, Paris
1922-1930.



Oil on panel of Watson Davis by
M. Ryerson.

breached the objectivity barrier in 1925 during the trial of John Scopes, who challenged a Tennessee law that forbade the teaching of evolution. Science Service staffers Davis and Frank Thone went to Tennessee to cover the trial that summer, filing dispatches that went into daily newspapers and SCIENCE NEWS LETTER. At the same time, Science Service was helping Clarence Darrow's defense team gather expert witnesses to testify on Scopes' behalf. After Scopes lost, Science Service raised funds for tuition so the teacher could continue his education.

Throughout the 1920s, SCIENCE NEWS LETTER included extensive and uncritical coverage of eugenics, a favorite topic of many scientists and journalists at the time, including Davis, who was a member of the board of the American Eugenics Society. The Jan. 19, 1924, issue described a report of the Eugenics Committee of the United States that favored the immigration of northwestern over southeastern Europeans. "Will Blending of Races Produce Supermen?" dominated the Nov. 26, 1927, issue. Based on the comments of a geneticist at the Carnegie Institution of Washington, the article discussed, most often in negative terms, offspring of various mixed ancestries. Slosson wrote that the public needed to understand that "the fate of the nation depends . . . on how they combine their chromosomes."

Yearly income from newspapers varied considerably during the Great Depression, but the steadily increasing readership of SCIENCE NEWS LETTER enabled Science Service to stay afloat. Davis, who became director of the service in 1929 upon Slosson's death, was always looking for ways to advance science. He promoted the use of microfilm rather than bulky paper records for storing information and convinced the board to back the new technology. His program "Adventures in Science" aired on CBS from 1930 to 1959. He came up with the idea for Things of Science, a subscription series of science experiment kits that were mailed all over the world. He was also an originator of the Science Talent Search for high school students, which started in 1941.

On the news front, Davis trained countless journalists, including science writer Ron Ross, who remembers carrying copy to the United Press office in the National Press Building after work so it could be sent over the news wire during its 4 a.m. time slot. Ross worked for Science Service from 1946 to 1950 and recalls that Davis could be demanding. He occasionally kept candy in his desk to appease people who lost their tempers because of his sometimes arbitrary nature.

"Watson had 'newsmen's sense,' and his emphasis was on getting stories out accurately and fast. [Science Service] was my real journalism school," says Ross.

Davis also liked to make forecasts. In 1939, he predicted the "practical production of power" from the splitting of the uranium atom. "Watson told me [that] shortly after the Manhattan Project started, he got a call from the government telling him to stop making projections. Uranium and thorium were not to be mentioned," Ross says.

During World War II, Davis (and many other editors) complied with the government's request. In a 1941 speech at Union College in Schenectady, N.Y., he said, "Science is important in the all-out effort we are launching, and the people must

understand that it is. We cannot give the details that, in happier times, we would give in our reports." Science was doing its share for the war effort, he added, and he was certain it would "play a dominant role in making the rearranged world worth living in." As part of Science Service's war effort, it offered a pocket-sized, lightweight, monthly version of SCIENCE NEWS LETTER to men and women in the service for \$1.25 year.

SCIENCE NEWS LETTER was one of the first publications to delve into the debate about the health effects of radiation and the atomic bomb, reporting in December 1948 on disagreements among scientists. Davis and his colleagues also wrote a book, *Atomic Bombing: How to Protect Yourself*.

"[Science] Service was especially valuable to journalists before there was much accurate science reporting," says Victor Cohn, former science editor of the Washington Post. After World War II, however, the atomic bomb began stimulating newspapers to do more science coverage on their own, says Cohn, making a science wire less necessary. A further increase in the number of science journalists came with Sputnik and space exploration in the 1960s.

When Warren Kornberg became managing editor in 1966, his charge was to transform SCIENCE NEWS into a more professional newsmagazine. He focused the writers on the magazine rather than the news service, which he felt had lost its value to newspapers.

"As a news service, Science Service had outlived its day,"

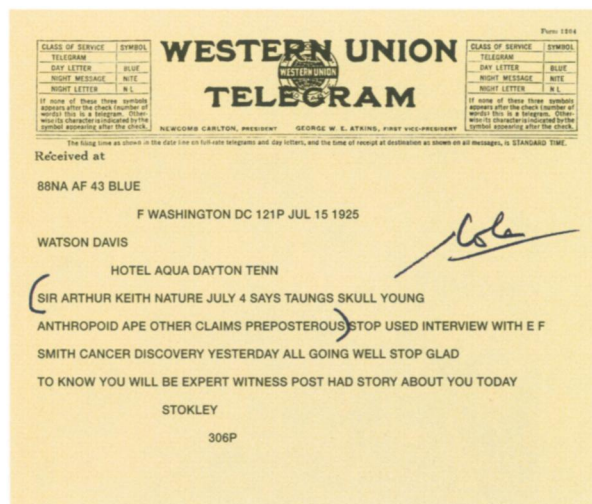
says Kornberg. "With newspapers putting on science staffs, it would have been hard to compete." The economics also seemed questionable. Newspapers did not want to spend much money for copy. In fact, Kornberg recalls a major paper being willing to spend only \$10 for a column by a prominent scientist. The news service was eventually discontinued.

Despite its demise, the news service helped shape U.S. journalism as well as the public's appetite for science reporting. Science Service created a "market for science news and a pattern for the emerging profession of science journalism. The dozen or so science writers who began their careers in the thirties perpetuated the ideas set forth by the Science Service and adopted a similar style," wrote sociologist Dorothy Nelkin in *Selling Science* (1987).

Journalists today consider SCIENCE NEWS "a must-read," says Ben Patrusky, executive director of the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing and a member of Science Service's board of trustees. "SCIENCE NEWS gives a sense of the process and product of science, and it addresses science cleanly, with no axes to grind."

Malcolm Browne, a senior science writer for the New York Times, has been reading SCIENCE NEWS since the late 1970s. "It provides a general overview of science," he says, and "very helpfully calls attention to all or most of the major developments each week." Browne nominated SCIENCE NEWS for the 1987 George Polk Award for excellence in reporting, which the magazine won. In his nomination, he wrote, "I can't imagine any significant development in science, however arcane the discipline, escaping the speedy notice of SCIENCE NEWS." □

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Telegram sent from Washington by Science Service staff writer James Stokley to Watson Davis at the site of the Scopes trial.