

ELECTRONICS

Tell If Speaker Is Boring

► ARE YOU a bore?

If your best friends won't tell you, the invention of a University of Oklahoma professor will.

The tattle-tale device is an electromagnetic movement meter developed by Dr. Elwood A. Kretsinger, assistant professor of speech. The audience-reaction machine measures the amount of fidgeting or physical movement in a group of listeners.

It consists of three instruments. One feeds electromagnetic energy into a wire strung along the backs of chairs where the audience is seated. As the listeners move, the energy they absorb is recorded on an amplifier, and another instrument charts the movements on a long coil of graph paper.

Study the red-ink squiggles on the paper tape, compare them with a carefully timed speech and you have a picture record of where you lost your audience's interest.

If you have quoted a boring batch of statistics for five minutes, the tape will tell the tale. Instead of a steady, relatively even red line, the meter will zig-zag back and forth like a drunk walking a chalk line.

Dr. Kretsinger has a four-year background in radio and radar while in the Marines during World War II, plus experience as a seismograph engineer doing geophysical exploration for a short time following his discharge.

At the University of Southern California in 1949, where he was working on his Ph.D., Dr. Kretsinger developed his meter,

after helping set up equipment for a series of studies on dramatic plays.

"We began to wonder if there wasn't a way we could measure audience reaction, to get unconscious response, and hit on the idea of doing it electronically," he said.

The movement meter is most effective in recording reaction to serious works.

"In some passages, the only response you want is lack of movement," Dr. Kretsinger explained. "Repeated tests showed us that where there is maximum movement in the audience, there is minimum interest in the drama."

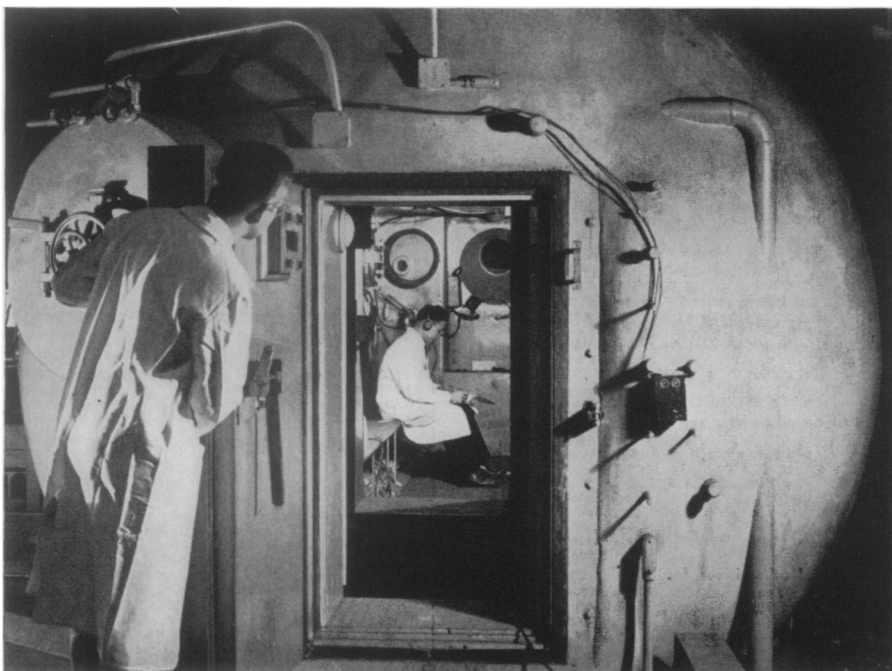
To glue his test audiences to their seats, Dr. Kretsinger used dynamic recordings of recent historic events. To induce fidgets, he played a recording of a speech in which a woman explained how she raised squash.

So far the meter has been used only to test the reactions of adult audiences.

"A group of children probably would give us completely different results," he pointed out. "Youngsters move for everything, often wiggling when they are particularly interested. I want to try the meter on them one of these days."

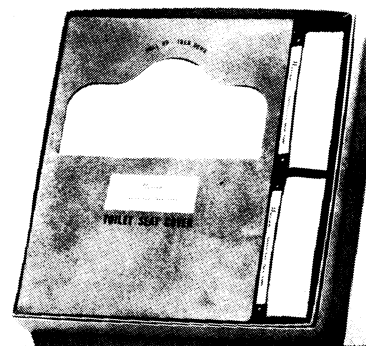
The audience never touches the wiring for the meter, and the wire can be hidden on a panel placed behind a bank of chairs. The present equipment will test the reactions of 12 persons at a time, but he would like to have enough meters to test individual reactions in a larger group.

Science News Letter, May 17, 1952



PRESSURE EFFECTS STUDIED—The bomb-like equipment shown here is used by the University of Pennsylvania's Medical School for research on the effects of high altitude and ocean pressure on human beings.

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