

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATING SCIENCE TO THE PUBLIC

by

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I want to thank Dr. Kingman for the opportunity to talk to you about the communication of science to the public, a topic which was my primary concern at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and which continues to interest me in my present position at Science Service.

There are a variety of reasons why it is important to communicate science to the public, but as one goes through them, there is a recurring theme which seems to me to stand out more than all the rest. This concerns the need for a scientifically literate citizenry that can participate intelligently in the democratic decision-making process. This is not to say that the citizen can or should be able to participate directly in the formulation of policy, but he should have the information which will enable him to choose among alternatives offered. And while he may never be as qualified as the experts who recommend policy, he should have background better to judge their ability and the recommendations which they make.

As you all know, this is not a new rationale. Mr. E. W. Scripps of the Scripps-Howard newspapers, who was responsible for the founding of Science Service in 1921, was at that time concerned about the need for citizens who understand science in society. And since then this need has been referred to countless times in speeches, panel discussions, meetings, and reports. In fact, it has been mentioned so often that there is a tendency on the part of many to ignore it.

I would like to suggest that at no time has the importance of communicating science to the public been greater, for more and more important decisions are going to be made in the coming months and years that are going to directly affect the conduct of scientific enterprise, from the limitations under which scientific research is carried out to the funds available for the support of scientific research. I see these decisions being affected by a number of trends.

First, there is a growing tendency for the public to perceive science and the applications of science as impinging on widely held human values. Science has not only moved out of the laboratory into the area of policy, but now it has moved even further on into ethics. From questions relating to human experimentation to those involving the prolongation of life, science is touching on basic values that have been evolving since the beginning of mankind.

When anything touches on such elemental feelings, there is bound to be a reaction, and not all of this reaction may be completely satisfactory to the scientific community. Thus, it is essential that the scientific point of view be presented. I would also like to suggest that communication is a two-way process, and that it is important for scientists to receive messages as well as send them out. By receiving such messages, ranging from personal conversations to public opinion polls, the scientists can have a far better idea of what the need for information is, and satisfy this need more rapidly and efficiently.

A second trend is the great increase in controversy concerning science. When I first came to the AAAS, the principal controversy at the time was about fallout. Then came Rachel Carson and the pesticide controversy. And now it is hard to keep up with all of the new issues that are being raised about science and the applications of science.

I personally feel that this is a healthy trend if there is adequate communication about the various sides of issues. Democratic-decision making is not a neat and orderly process, but it is an effective one when there is participation from all sides, and the issues are given a wide airing. For science-related issues, scientists are an essential element in providing background information and alternative solutions for consideration.