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"I Don't Want To Be Quoted by the Press"

A CONFERENCE on "Mass communication" was held in June at Ann Arbor under the auspices of the University of Michigan department of journalism and concurrently with the American Institute of Chemical Engineers' "International nuclear engineering congress." One feature was a panel discussion devoted to problems that face journalists and scientists in preparing news releases on scientific topics. Its short title, as given on the printed program, was "I don't want to be quoted by the press." This might strike one as ironical. How can a scientist avoid being quoted in these days if he is producing anything significant or has ideas or information that are worth quoting?

Any competent scientist who publishes or speaks—even before professional groups—or who grants interviews must be prepared and willing to be quoted. Certainly courage is needed, especially in an atmosphere of fear, to speak out on some matters. But the "dangerous" topics are likely to be the very ones that irresponsible individuals outside the sciences are most willing to tackle, freely and without restraint. Even though such people may possess the facts, this will count for little if they are guided by a well-known formula for one kind of success: the truth be damned; tell the public what it wants to hear. So it is not only within Government proper that we must seek to maintain the principle of checks and balances. Help is also needed from scientists who not only know the facts but are ingrained with the ideal of intellectual honesty.

Of course there are times not to speak out. Perhaps the necessary facts are lacking; or questions may be asked that for legal or ethical reasons should not be

answered. But even then a person must be prepared to be quoted. His *No comment* may prove to be news and perhaps will rate an interpretation. Yet the right to say *No* is part of our right to speak freely. A sensible person will practice various ways of saying *No* until he hits on one that arouses a minimum of resentment. A snappy *No comment* seemingly is not one of these ways, according to some of our advisors among the members of the press.

Obviously there is one way to play safe: make a deal with an interviewer that words can be quoted, provided that name and institutional connections are withheld; or let a document get "lost" in a suitable place; and so on. Information thus obtained is often delicately referred to as having come from "a reliable source"; but there are other less polite names for such a source.

Any person pursuing a science who indulges in such practices simply is not playing the game according to the rules. He is violating—it is being done too often these days for comfort—parts of a code involving ideals, attitudes, and character traits that has been in the making for some 20 centuries. This code comprises a number of articles, but two of them of importance here are intellectual honesty and possession of the courage of one's convictions. To ignore a single article of this code is to contribute materially to the weakening of the scientific endeavor. If we undermine any appreciable part of the code, creative science will disappear and, for that matter, so also will our Western civilization as we have known it.

Thus only two courses seem to be open: either to speak out publicly or tactfully to say nothing. Admittedly, some journalists have noted an increasing tendency among scientists to seek publicity for their institutions or themselves, often for obviously selfish reasons. However, our present concern is with the men of science who have something to say that the general public really needs to hear.—D.R.

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