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Publicity: The Scientists' Responsibility

Only a few years ago scientists had frequent justification for the complaint that many newspaper and magazine accounts of their work were sensational and distorted. Each of us probably has his own personal example. My first break into the popular press followed a meeting at which I reported a study in which white rats were used. In a newspaper story in which the closest approach to accuracy was the misspelling of my name, I was credited with the advice that turning white rats loose in a house would rid the premises of wild ones.

Mistakes still occur, and the sensational is sometimes more likely to be published than the sober. But the past 20 years have seen great improvements in the popular reporting of scientific work. The National Association of Science Writers has been a powerful force in this direction, and as science reporting has improved, scientists have become more willing to work cooperatively with press representatives in seeing that their work is accurately and informatively reported to the interested public.

Now a new difficulty is growing, and a new criticism. Where scientists used to be reluctant to talk to reporters, some now seem too eager. One of the best papers presented at the 1954 AAAS meeting was also one of the most severely criticized on the score that the author's press-room abstract claimed too much credit and originality. The results of the Salk vaccine studies were released in what was probably the largest scientific press conference ever held. Granting the great public interest and the unusual circumstances, the magazine *Newsweek* still described the event as having a "circus atmosphere," an atmosphere made doubly unfortunate by the disappointment and confusion that quickly followed.

More recently, a columnist in the *New York Times* has criticized the televised *March of Medicine* program for going beyond the bounds of discretion and providing additional justification for the previously heard criticism that televised medical programs have sometimes shown a tendency toward sensationalism.

Several years ago a book on sexual behavior was released to the press before it became available to anyone else. The book had good publicity value, and stories about it probably helped to sell thousands of extra copies of newspapers and magazines. But some of the reporters who wrote those stories were critical, on the excellent grounds that scientific work should first be subject to the critical appraisal of other scientists.

Professional science writers want their reports to be accurate. Facts are checked, reference sources are used, different points of view are examined, and frequently several different scientists are consulted on a single story. As a result there has been much excellent popular reporting of scientific work. But there are also deadlines to be met, and no reporter wants to be scooped on what looks like an exciting story. Inaccurate and exaggerated reports thus sometimes get published. But the reporter is not wholly at fault; he is at the mercy of the scientist whose story he is telling. If the original report is obscure, or is treated in a sensational manner, or claims too much originality, the primary blame for an inaccurate story falls on the scientist. He may get wide publicity the next day, but he has done a disservice to his newspaper friends, his colleagues, and his science.—D.W.