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Behind the *Times*

Some of the people who read both newspapers and scientific journals are surprised to discover that on occasion new findings revealed by scientists in articles submitted to journals are making their initial appearance in the daily press. Before the scientist himself sets forth in complete form his results and supporting evidence, a reporter scrapes some of the icing off the cake to give the general public a taste. But if this kind of occurrence is one of the signs of the growing role that science is playing in public affairs, it does raise some questions about the functions of the two kinds of publication and of the relation between them. The contrast between newspapers and scientific journals is something more than the contrast between popular and technical presentations.

Although a scientist who has completed an article is anxious to have his findings appear in the near future, to a newspaperman with a story instant publication is none too soon. The interest each newspaperman has in reporting the news before his fellows can work to the advantage of the public and to the advantage of scientists. With a wide range of scientific developments having an immediate bearing on the general welfare and security of the nation, it is important for the public to have news of developments and it is often important that they have the news fast. The scientific community is also served by this form of rapid communication, since investigators can learn of work being done in other laboratories even if the full details are not provided.

If newspapers are primarily interested in quick reporting, then scientific journals are concerned chiefly with establishing the authenticity of what they publish. Of course, a news story about a new finding not only states what is claimed but who makes the claim and the circumstances of his making it. But the appearance of the story in a newspaper, unlike the appearance of an article in a journal, does not add to the authority of the research. Publication of an article in a scientific journal does so because editors of journals frequently have articles describing new work examined critically, before publication, by specialists in the subject with which the article deals.

Although newspapers and scientific journals have different functions, a possible point of conflict between them is that reporters may want information about new findings that scientific editors and publishers should not yet reveal. The only proper way, it seems to us, for a journal to release information about its contents is through the appearance of the journal itself. To institute a policy of disclosing prior to the publication date a portion of the contents would add a task to the work of editing and reviewing articles that might work against the journal's primary responsibility of attempting to insure the merit of what it publishes.

Given the fact that some reporters may ply their trade more cleverly than others, and given the fact that journals are not the only means of communication in the scientific world, another aspect to the relationship between the daily press and the scientific press also follows. Besides scientific journals, there are addresses, meetings, and gossip. Consequently, on occasion a reporter will come upon a piece of research that he finds newsworthy, but which, although it is scheduled for scientific publication, has not yet appeared. If, under these circumstances, the reporter scoops the journal, then those involved in scientific publication hope that he gets the story right.—J.T.