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Author's Choice

Science has recently been the target of several pot shots from other members of the publishing world. The criticism started, so far as we know, when an alert science writer of the *Washington Post and Times Herald* discovered that "Strontium-90 in Man III," the article on page 1249, was in the *Science* office but had not yet been published. Because the concentration of strontium-90 is a matter of general concern, because the authors had chosen to have their report published in *Science* instead of giving prior release to the newspapers, and because the interval between receipt of the article and its appearance was longer than the reporter thought justified, he concluded that *Science* was either negligently slow in bringing important information to the public or was willfully withholding that information.

Under the title "Strontium-90 in U. S. Children, the Report That the AEC is Withholding," *The Nation* then went off in two directions. It censured the Atomic Energy Commission and *Science* for "sitting on" an article of vital public concern, and then argued that the data are so limited that the conclusions lack significance and do not give anything like a true picture of the strontium-90 situation. The *New York Times* then joined the attack with a summary of *The Nation* article.

The critics claim that the report should have been given to the general press instead of being sent to *Science*, a journal that *The Nation* describes as a "respected but highly technical publication of limited circulation." (We accept this description, but with amusement point out that *Science* has twice the circulation of *The Nation*.)

The claim raises a question that merits clearer formulation than the critics have supplied: Under what circumstances should the traditional customs of scientific publication be followed, and under what circumstances is it preferable to give a scientific report to the public press prior to its appearance in a scientific journal? The research worker has a choice. If he presents his material in an open meeting or gives it directly to the press, newspapers can report it immediately. The material reaches the public quickly—if at all—but relatively unscreened and rarely in sufficient detail to enable other scientists to form their own judgments about the adequacy of the conclusions.

If the report is published in a scientific journal, it does not reach the public as quickly, but when it does, it has survived critical scientific review, has frequently been made clearer as a result of suggestions from the editor or referee, and is published in sufficient detail to enable scientific colleagues to appraise data and methods as well as conclusions.

Custom dictates that the choice be made by the scientist rather than by the institution that supported the work or the editor to whom the account of it is submitted. Both alternatives have their proper uses, but there is not yet agreement on the conditions under which each is preferable. Until agreement is reached on the criteria for each, we will honor the choice an author makes when he sends an article to *Science*. We will continue to have articles critically reviewed and will publish the accepted ones in sufficient detail to enable other scientists to gain more information than they can normally get from newspaper accounts. Note, however, that when an author wishes to reach the public more quickly, there is an alternative channel open to him.

We think it desirable that both scientists and journalists have a clear understanding of the nature of these options.—D.W.