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Science for the Citizen

"A democratic citizenry today must understand science in order to have a wide and intelligent democratic participation in many national decisions. Such decisions are being made now. They cannot be postponed for twenty years while we are improving our present educational system so that its products will constitute a significant fraction of the mature voting population. . . ." Thus the President's Science Advisory Committee expressed itself nearly two years ago [*Education for the Age of Science* (24 May 1959)]. What this implies is that if science is to have the kind of support that is essential to its vigorous development, improved ways must be found to increase public understanding of what science and technology can do, of how they are carried out, and of the importance of basic research for its own sake and as the indispensable foundation for an advancing technology.

The public to be reached is the general adult population, but what is the most effective way to reach it? In 1959 the National Science Foundation decided that an approach through the mass media—newspapers, magazines, radio, and television—would be the most effective first step, but that this should be an indirect approach, accomplished by helping reporters, science writers, and editors to meet with scientists under conditions that would permit unhurried discussion of scientific problems and a free interchange of ideas.

The problem so far has involved eight 2- to 10-day "workshops" and "seminars" for reporters and science writers and four 1- to 3-day conferences for editors. To judge by the response of the participants, the results justify the effort: the scientists have come to have a more sympathetic understanding of the reporter's problems, and the reporters and science writers have learned more about scientists and their methods of research; the editors have profited in the same way as the writers and have, in addition, come to appreciate the difficulties their reporters face in putting scientific results into readable form for the public.

The enthusiastic response to a small national meeting for editors and scientists held in an informal setting at Marcell, Minnesota, last September led some of the editors who attended to believe that many of their colleagues might welcome a similar experience. Accordingly, the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the American Association for the Advancement of Science decided to cosponsor a seminar on the day prior to the annual ASNE meeting last week, and the National Science Foundation supplied the modest amount of money required to bring the five participating scientists to Washington. The scientists, with one exception, dealt with science itself, not with science and politics or science and culture. Harlow Shapley talked about the outer reaches of space; Francis O. Schmitt, about macromolecules in organisms; Frank Press, about recent developments in geophysics; and Frank A. Brown, Jr., about biological clocks. Warren Weaver, the luncheon speaker, discussed with characteristic breadth and brilliance the reciprocal responsibilities of scientists and the press in informing the public about science.

There is no question about the immediate success of the meeting: the editors relished the rich scientific fare that was provided. But the more important question is: How much of the initial enthusiasm will be translated into action when the editors go home? If they have been convinced that the need to cover events in science is as compelling as the need to cover sports, politics, and the arts, then the long-term impact of the program will be assured.—G.DU.S.