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AAAS Meetings: A Progress Report

For well over a hundred years the Meetings of the AAAS have reflected the subtle changes and major shifts in the scientific enterprise of the United States. Their history records the bold innovations of the latter half of the 19th century, when research establishments were proposed that still serve today; the enormous growth in size and complexity of the separate branches of science; and the gradual drift into specialization. Of late, they show the beginning of a new phase: the move away from excessive fragmentation and unconcern for unpleasant and unexpected results of technology toward a more lively involvement with the world around.

Much thought has gone recently into redefining the purpose and objective of the Annual Meetings. What can they do effectively? What functions are obsolete because they can be done better elsewhere? Where are the major needs and payoffs? No simple "either-or" answer appeared. However, a number of guiding principles emerged which have already been given practical expression on a scale such that their impact is becoming apparent.

A decided shift is taking place toward framing questions that deal with the consequences of science and technology. Through panel discussions, general symposia, reviews, and lectures, wide-ranging series of subjects are being presented for consideration by a concerned audience. Massive use of "live" television is making a substantial part of the proceedings available to people who have not heretofore considered themselves invited and welcome.

On a more technical level, increasing emphasis is being placed on truly interdisciplinary symposia in which science is advanced through the illumination of topics that will not bend to the attack of a single discipline. Individuals of widely divergent views, including spokesmen for architecture, law, religion, art and the humanities, are often essential participants in this difficult and demanding task.

These two ventures are the growth points of the current enterprise. Their addition to the more traditional undertakings makes it important that consideration be given to the size of the Meetings, so that they are neither so large as to lose the human scale nor so small as to be dull; it demands careful choice of topics that are neither so general as to disappoint the specialist nor so fragmented as to repel the general audience. Time and space must be found for celebrating historical anniversaries and their results, for reviewing the accomplishments of large national research undertakings, for inspecting the interactions between science and other human activities, for reinstituting demonstration lectures and instructive science exhibits.

Two additional ideas are being explored. Detlev Bronk, in 1967, revived the long-neglected concept of an "Open City," where a close bond is established between city and participants through tours, open houses, exhibits, and plays. This was tried and found workable. Athelstan Spilhaus, president-elect of the AAAS, wants attention given to the "non-Meeting" aspects that would permit participation without the need for physical presence. New tools of communication, assisted by the links between the AAAS and regional groups that are attuned to new responsibilities, should make this possible. By television or radio, programs can be made available to diverse local audiences and discussed by many more people than could comfortably be accommodated at the Meeting. Both proposals require the support of people with ideas and with funds. Both will be pursued intensively.

—WALTER G. BERL, *Editor, AAAS Meetings*