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Scientists' Responsibility for Public Information

One of the more vexing questions confronting scientists whose research may have a direct impact on the lives of the public has to do with the pressures to release observations and conclusions prematurely. One example is the question of early dissemination of information bearing on the likelihood of a major earthquake.

Geophysicists generally agree that results of earthquake prediction studies to date, although promising, do not indicate early arrival at the goal of providing accurate predictions of the time, place, and magnitude of large earthquakes. It is possible, from retrospective looks at phenomena immediately preceding some large earthquakes and from a few accurately predicted events such as the 1975 Haicheng earthquake in northeast China, to see certain premonitory patterns. However, when confronted by one or more apparent anomalies in geophysical observations in earthquake-prone areas, what is the responsible course of action for the scientists involved?

There have been too few repetitions of the precursor-earthquake relationship to allow any realistic estimates of the probability of an earthquake's occurrence. Therefore, attempts to inform the public of the scientists' concern over potentially precursory changes must be so hedged with qualifications that public officials would have no basis for taking any but routine precautionary measures, such as leaving fire trucks outside fire stations. Estimates of the time and magnitude of the possible event would probably be too uncertain to call for such measures as evacuation of unsafe structures and shutdown of nuclear reactors. However, between these extremes there is still a range of precautions that could be taken, although at some expense and with some loss of normal public services. If a severe earthquake following a vague warning does occur with injury and loss of life, does the failure of public officials to act render them liable for civil suits? If, on the other hand, the earthquake does not take place, are the costs of having taken routine precautions likely to reflect on the competence of the officials? Indirect costs to individuals, such as loss in property value, might also make for civil liability.

In our litigious society, little allowance is made for normal human errors if they have a substantial effect on someone's pocketbook or health. A course of action might be to maintain that earthquake prediction is still a subject for research and that no results, at present, warrant short-term or public warnings. A critical, objective look at the assembly of precursory phenomena collected up to now might lead most scientists to take this stance, in view of the potential for litigation and loss of public confidence to ensue from erroneous public predictions.

A different position has been taken in the past. In 1979 the U.S. Geological Survey issued a press release noting anomalous variations in radon emission and strain accumulation in southern California. It was hoped that the release would spur prudent homeowners to prepare for a possible large earthquake. A factual account of the observations and their significance, or lack thereof, is the only way to dispel the rumors that flourish in the absence of official statements. Thus, discussion of the observations has appeared to be the soundest policy, despite uncertainty about the public's reaction to the expressions of concern accompanying the discussion.

As our understanding of precursory phenomena improves, there will undoubtedly be warnings that are more specific and hence likely to occasion a serious response. Unless allowances are made for the possibility of an erroneous or ill-timed warning, few scientists will be willing to risk the opprobrium and litigation that could arise from open discussion. Thus, there is a conflict between the public's need for information and the scientists' need to be protected against threats to their livelihood. Unless some legal protection is forthcoming, the matter will most likely be resolved by the scientists retreating to an uninformative conservatism when asked to interpret their results in the public forum.—C. B. RALEIGH, *Earthquake Prediction Program, U.S. Geological Survey, Menlo Park, California 94025*