

# AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE

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## A Transition for *Science*

As the flagship of AAAS, *Science* occupies a special place in the affairs of the Association even as it does in scientific communication both at home and across national boundaries. Its editorship is crucial to its reputation and influence. It was no small matter, then, for President E. Margaret Burbidge to make it known at the Annual Meeting in Detroit that Philip H. Abelson has signified his intention to step aside as Editor of *Science*. The current plan is that he will retire at the end of 1984.

The Board of Directors, which will select an Editor to follow Philip Abelson, will have its hands full. In 1962, when Dael Wolfe prevailed on Abelson to take on the editorship, the scene was relatively quiet. American science was in its full flood of expansion, man had not yet strolled the moon, energy was cheap and plentiful, research budgets were robust, the national economy seemed indefinitely secure, foreign technological competition was no problem, the computer revolution was in its early adolescence, and the promise of biotechnology was yet to be realized. The field of science journalism, though already making its mark, was still a minor factor in the world of the media.

Now the situation is very different. Scientific and technological productivity, in the United States and elsewhere, is at a peak. National interests are coupled, with increasing intricacy, to science and innovation. Technological change is altering accepted social structures and influencing political agendas. Ethical issues of baffling complexity have emerged to trouble the scientific conscience. The state of scientific and engineering education, long buried in neglect, has become a major worry. Scientific and technical complexity is at the center of diplomatic and national security fencing. Dilemmas of scale proliferate with the advance of knowledge and its intimate union with power. A new problem of democracy is that of enhancing scientific and technical literacy as a basis for negotiating problems of choice.

As though all this were not enough, the transition of Editors is fated to occur when scientific publishing and communication is itself at a crossroads, facing challenges from innovative telecommunications and entrepreneurial interventions that seem certain to confound and disturb what were thought to be long-settled practices in journal publishing and library services. And adding to the complications is the very real possibility of government interference with timely and uncensored publication of scientific articles and reports on grounds of national security and technology transfer.

The succession of Editors of *Science* thus will reflect both continuity and discontinuity, the most striking characteristics of science itself. The Association's stakes in the choice of a new Editor are clear enough, but they are not greater than the stakes of the scientific community, which has regarded *Science* as a known and reliable quantity for more than two decades. The role of the journal is certainly not that of a trade paper speaking for a scientific constituency. It has never been that, for it has not cared to treat scientific aberrations with tenderness or compassion, nor pandered to political favor. It is not likely to change its habits.

In the near future, the Board of Directors will make known its approach to the search for a new Editor. Meanwhile, it will be doing some heavy thinking. What scarcely needs saying is that the example and performance of Philip Abelson will go far to shape what is to come.—WILLIAM D. CAREY