

American Association for the Advancement of Science

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A Mission in Transition

The task of enhancing public literacy where science and technology are concerned is at once compelling and uphill. Undeniably, this task needs to be approached primarily through early and intermediate education so as to build a foundation of principles and perceptions that one will carry through life in an era of growing complexity and troubling choices. But this is a large order as things now stand, and the limits to public understanding of science are large and troubling.

For 40 years AAAS has had the stated goal of increasing the public understanding of science. Among a variety of AAAS initiatives directed to that goal, two stand out. The first was the AAAS role in aiding the launching of "Nova," the prized public television program that has earned a large audience. The second was the creation in 1979 of a new magazine dedicated expressly to bridging the distance between science and the citizen, an initiative emanating from the concept of Allen Hammond, at that time editor of Research News at *Science*.

When AAAS ceased publishing *Science 86* this summer and sold its assets to Time Inc., we could reflect on both good and bad news. The good news was that *Science 86* and its predecessor editions had been a roaring editorial success beyond all expectations, with a high circulation and a fascinated cohort of readers. The bad news was a severe advertising famine, resulting in a heavy burden on AAAS's financial resources and an unacceptable exposure to indefinite adversity.

The decision to cut losses, at the expense of a magazine that was a demonstrable achievement for the public understanding of science, was acutely painful. What has been learned from our 7-year venture? On the business side of the matter, a built-in economic risk was present from the beginning because of the unpredictability of advertisers' perceptions of a science magazine as a medium for selling consumer goods. Additionally, it is plain that a nonprofit organization should have had greater discretionary resources than we did if it hoped to take on stiff competition from the profit sector of the publishing industry and to hang tough over a prolonged cycle of deficit financing.

Turning to the mission itself, the lessons are quite different. With a talented staff, AAAS demonstrated that science can be made both understandable and absorbing through the print medium. The loss of *Science 86* has been accompanied by a flood of letters from readers whose evident deprivation is keen and inconsolable. Indeed, a number of readers have offered to pay more for their subscriptions if this would resuscitate the magazine. There is a clear message here. The demand for responsible science journalism is strong, very strong. That is a highly positive sign that the well-documented problem of scientific literacy is by no means insoluble.

Now AAAS must decide how best to continue addressing its responsibility to communicate science to an avidly interested nonscientist audience. We have had good success with radio programming over the years, beginning with a public radio program called "Focus" and continuing with "Report on Science" on CBS, with an estimated listening audience of about 5 million, and perhaps our radio efforts can be scaled up. A different option would be to greatly enlarge our Mass Media Science and Engineering Fellows program that places young scientists and engineers at print and broadcast sites, a project designed to familiarize scientists with the needs of the media in reporting and commenting on scientific and technical news developments. We have, at intervals, looked longingly at the attractions of television as a medium for explaining science, but although the economics of communicating on commercial channels are discouraging, the potential of cable could be another story. And from a strategic point of view, enhancing the capabilities of the professional science reporters and writers could turn out to be an option with much promise.

The troubling outcome of our venture with a general interest science magazine has in no way deflected AAAS from its objective. The Board of Directors has begun to explore a broad range of initiatives in the arena of communication about science and its place in an informed society, and it welcomes the counsel of our members at this transition point in the association's work.—WILLIAM D. CAREY