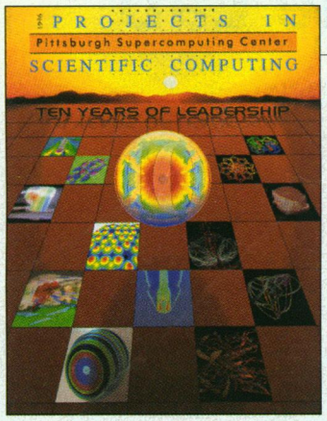
SCIENCESCOPE

edited by JOCELYN KAISER



Too close. NSF wants to avoid staff conflicts with schools, like Pittsburgh, competing for new supercomputing grants.

Competition Creates Conflicts at NSF

Federal agencies say partnerships are a good way to get the most bang for the buck. But the team approach also creates conflicts of interest, and that's making it harder for the National Science Foundation (NSF) to conduct an impartial review of proposals for its new supercomputing plan, Partnerships for Advanced Computational Infrastructure. The $65 million program will fund two or three successors to NSF's current supercomputing centers, all four of which are finalists in the new contest.

The problem is that several senior NSF officials have ties to competing institutions. Director Neal Lane is former provost of Rice University, a major partner in a consortium based at NSF's National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA) in Illinois. Joseph Bordogna, acting deputy director, is on leave from the University of Pennsylvania, which is heading a proposal and also belongs to a group led by the Pittsburgh Supercomputing Center, another NSF center. And Juris Hartmanis, the new head of NSF's computer science and engineering directorate—which funds the program—is on leave from Cornell, home of the NSF-funded Cornell Theory Center.

The three men have recused themselves from the competition, leaving NSF to summon back Hartmanis's predecessor, Paul Young, to manage it. Although Young is on the faculty of the University of Washington, which has also teamed up with NCSA, NSF officials have decided that the school's role "is not sufficient to affect his judgment," says general counsel Lawrence Rudolph. The final decision will be made next spring by the National Science Board, some of whose members also work for schools in the running.

Russian Space Station Troubles Panic NASA

Russia is giving NASA officials heart palpitations over its wavering pledge to help fund the international space station program. Russian space officials recently warned NASA that they lack the money to complete work on the multimillion-dollar service module that is the centerpiece of their share of the orbiting lab. That warning set off alarms at NASA headquarters, prompting a meeting between Administrator Dan Goldin and White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta.

Panetta asked Goldin to come up with a set of proposals after this week's elections to try to get the module, which is months behind a slated April 1998 launch date, back on track. "We've got to solve this ourselves," says an agency source. Among the options being considered are allowing Russia to seek private financing or transferring U.S. money set aside for NASA's use of the Russian Mir space station to the new module. Russian officials are also working on solutions.

Shifting U.S. funds tagged for Mir to the module would be tricky, however, as NASA's budget is already strained, and congressional critics are watching closely to see if Russia can live up to its original commitment. If a solution can't be found soon, the issue is likely to be high on the agenda at a January meeting in Washington of Vice President Al Gore and Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin.

Academy's Radio Underwriting: Poor Timing?

For both the media and their sponsors, the appearance that news stories could be shaped in any way by underwriters is a highly sensitive issue. But it seems the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) blundered into that ethical gray area last week when it sponsored a newscast on National Public Radio (NPR) that—apparently by coincidence—featured a major NAS report on a controversial health issue.

The report, which found that electromagnetic fields (EMFs) are not a health threat (see p. 910), was given to reporters with the understanding that they would not publish or broadcast their stories until 11 a.m. on 31 October, when a news conference on the report was scheduled to end. Just after 11 a.m., a story about the report ran on NPR—followed by this announcement: "Support for NPR comes from National Academy Press, publisher for the National Academy of Sciences and affiliated institutions, announcing 1000 books online—www.nap.edu." That includes the EMFs study, available for $45 a pop.

NPR and NAS officials insist it was pure coincidence that the report was described in a broadcast underwritten by the NAS, whose first-ever $1500 NPR sponsorship—one of six spots over 8 days—ran earlier that day. "I had no earthly idea that [the academy press] had purchased [a sponsorship]," says NAS media coordinator Susan Turner-Lowe.

Alex Jones, host of NPR's *On the Media*, says such "questionable" juxtapositions may become more common as tight budgets force public broadcasting to take an increasingly "entrepreneurial bent."

Launch Hobbles Astrophysics Payloads

Argentinian and U.S. officials are struggling to rescue an international astrophysics mission that went awry on 4 November. Although both sides say they will move ahead with plans to launch two new spacecraft in 1997 and 1998, the partial loss of the Scientific Applications Satellite–B (SAC-B) is a particularly hard blow to the budding Argentinian space science community.

The $17 million SAC-B was crippled when the third stage of the Pegasus rocket, its launch vehicle, failed to disengage. The rocket was also carrying a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) satellite. While U.S. flight controllers managed to unfurl SAC-B's solar panels to provide power, they say there is little hope of separating the stage from the spacecraft. The U.S. and Italian experiments aboard could still beam back some data, but the Argentinian instruments are wholly blocked by the stage. Argentina's space agency built the 181-kilogram spacecraft to study solar flares, gamma-ray bursts, and the background radiation in the cosmos over a 3-year period, while NASA provided the launch aboard an Orbital Sciences Corp. rocket.

The partially blinded satellite could remain in orbit for up to a year. NASA officials say, however, that both countries intend to move forward with SAC-C, which will carry similar instruments. It would be launched aboard the U.S. shuttle at the end of 1998. Last week, NASA and Argentinian officials were also discussing a shuttle launch of the satellite prototype SAC-A to compensate for SAC-B.

Even less fortunate was MIT's $17 million High-Energy Transient Experiment (HETE), which featured three cameras to gather data on gamma-ray bursts and x-ray and ultraviolet emissions over 6 months. HETE's instruments are entirely blocked by the spent stage, and its battery died after 6 hours.