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EDITORIAL

Of Timeliness and Timelessness

Maybe you're like me: I don't have the time to read the daily news, but I can't resist it. I simply can't help looking at my local paper, plus the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, TV news . . . you get the picture. From my own experience, I would guess that none of the 10,000-plus weekly visitors to *Science*'s relatively new online daily news service ScienceNOW (www.sciencenow.org) really has the time to be looking at it either. And yet more and more do—in fact, 1500 people come every day to read the two stories that ScienceNOW feeds to inSight (www.apnet.com/insight), the Web site created by our collaborators at Academic Press.

Why are people making time for these sites? The attractions are several: breadth, selectivity, brevity, reliability, and accessibility. Over the past decade, *Science* (in print) has developed the world's largest global network of outstanding science journalists and a set of editors with experience at newspapers and newsweeklies as well as scientific publications. Applying these talents to an online delivery system, ScienceNOW produces a selection of the important science news items of the day, each distilled into a few short paragraphs. Some summarize unusually important research results days or weeks before the journals reach their subscribers. Others offer windows on sessions at scientific meetings as they are happening. Still others produce science policy scoops that may later be expanded on in *Science*. Each story is long enough to give an objective judgment on a piece of new work but short enough to avoid overwhelming those who are pressed for time.

A few examples will explain why scientists and others are logging on to ScienceNOW: On 18 June, ScienceNOW reported that physicists at the University of California at Berkeley had detected quantum oscillations in superfluid helium. It took 6 weeks before this news appeared as a scientific paper with coverage in the general press. A few months earlier, one of the major wire services reported that a French lab had achieved room-temperature superconductivity, but on that same day, ScienceNOW's message was to wait and see. And indeed, the reported breakthrough never panned out. Nor did the startling finding that the universe has an axis, a claim reported in print and electronic media throughout the world. ScienceNOW noted that the work was considered flawed by most astronomers, in an item that appeared days before the revision spread to other media.

In addition to speed and accuracy, ScienceNOW offers accessibility. Along with the many scientist users of ScienceNOW, the site is browsed by everyday citizens who have been hungering for good science in digestible bites. How many of us in the scientific community have fretted that there are too few reputable vehicles of scientific information for the lay public? Now we seem to have an embryonic strategy for improving science literacy: accessible, high-quality science news on the Web. Academic Press's inSight has pioneered in just that direction: The ScienceNOW news team provides the news, and the Academic Press team hyperlinks each story to related external and internal Web sites. An online dictionary provides definitions, other Web sites provide background information, and Associated Press journals provide greater depth of coverage.

This sort of feature will come to ScienceNOW itself in the not-too-distant future. In the meantime, we have just enhanced our site by allowing readers to search our archives by topic word. ScienceNOW only started in October of 1996, but already it has accumulated over 700 short science stories ranging across all scientific disciplines and including both research breakthroughs and science policy news. Topic-searching capability will begin to make the archives an educational resource. One other recent change in ScienceNOW has been our initiation of a registration system. For those who wonder why we've asked busy people to fill out a micro-questionnaire (you only have to register once and you don't have to remember your password), it's because one day we will try to save our enrollees some time by offering such new services as e-mailed alerts in fields of personal interest.

Having invested time you probably couldn't afford in reading this editorial, will you take another 20 minutes or so to log on to www.sciencenow.org? It's free to all *Science* Online subscribers (it's free to everyone through October) and it's a lot more interesting than the plain vanilla news (car crashes, crime, stocks, the weather) that most of us will watch this evening. If science is where you like to spend your time, trade up from snooze news to science news.

Ellis Rubinstein