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Science on TV

We do not know how much confusion about science is generated in the minds of the television viewers by the ubiquitous pitchman in the white coat, full of "scientific proofs" and oily admonitions. He relies on gadgets and the use of "controls," often irrelevant. He may triumphantly demonstrate the efficacy of a deodorant by passing a presumably noxious vapor through a "smellometer" before and after treatment. Or he may demonstrate the well-known capacity of an acid to eat a hole in a pocket handkerchief and show that addition of such-and-such a product, conveniently available in the form of pills, can neutralize the acid. To anyone who recalls a bit of physiology this is puzzling, for he knows that the stomach contents are normally acid and that the digestive juices operate only in an acid medium. The moral is difficult to draw. It would seem to be that somehow acid is a bad thing to have in your stomach or, possibly, that if you want to eat pocket handkerchiefs, you had better not take such-and-such at the same time.

But it is scarcely fair to judge television by its commercials alone. Some good scientific programs have been produced. To select only one example, the California Academy of Sciences has been producing a weekly television show called "Science in Action" for more than six years. This production has been highly acceptable to scientists as well as to the general public. Perhaps the essential element in its success can be expressed in a single word: integrity. The show presents scientists themselves, has scripts approved by the scientists who appear, and is straightforward and honest in presentation. There is no sensationalism, no talking down to the audience, and no glossing over of unsolved problems. In short, the picture of scientists and their work is realistically, truthfully, and entertainingly presented.

But this program has not reached a nation-wide audience. Accordingly, we are especially interested in a new scientific television series that is to begin on 19 November at 10 P.M. E.S.T. over the network of the Columbia Broadcasting System [*Science* 124, 929 (9 Nov. 1956)]. This will be an hour show in color. The aim of the series is to "give the public a better understanding of what science is and how scientists go about their work." The producers "take the view that science is a challenge that engages both the mind and the imagination" and that the series is designed to "present authentic scientific information in terms that will interest and entertain a mass popular audience." The fact that a distinguished group of scientists have acted as advisers to the producers should assure authenticity of the scientific events depicted, but we must wait for opening night to judge whether or not the producers and director have found a way to "interest and entertain a mass popular audience" without distorting the aims and spirit of science.

The aims of the series are laudable. It is important that a better public understanding of science be achieved. If such understanding is achieved, one of the consequences, and not perhaps the least of them, will be that viewers may no longer be impressed by the pitchman in the white coat. We wish the project every success.—G. DUS.