Capital City Readout—AAAS Communications Experiment

A Regional Information Exchange on the Employment of Science and Technology in Relation to the Needs of the Washington, D.C., Area
Washington Hilton Hotel, 26–30 December 1972, 1 p.m. to 9 p.m.

The AAAS is sponsoring an experimental regional information exchange in conjunction with its Annual Meeting. The project concentrates on the Washington metropolitan region as a case study area and will consist of 40 exhibits by organizations from the area. The event will be open to AAAS members and the general public. A feedback system will be used to collect visitors' responses to the issues raised by the exhibits. The Association has undertaken the project as a contribution to the public understanding of science and technology. It may also illuminate a concept in which the Association expects to take an increasing interest—the idea of centers organized on a regional basis where citizens and public agencies may exchange information about the social dimensions of science and technology. The event is being organized by Joseph Valerio and Thomas Vonier, both of the School of Architecture at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. They have contributed the following commentary on the event:

Urban issues are rarely simple, nor are they purely technical in nature. The questions confronting citizens and public agencies in urban areas are more fundamental—they involve differences of perception and communication among organizations and individuals. More often than not, where disparities seem to occur between what people expect and what they actually get in the way of urban goods and services, they can be seen as the product of differing perceptions or inadequate communications. Where conflicts of goals and interests are genuine, they give rise to frustrated expectations and, where this is true, trust is placed in the abilities of various democratic processes to provide "just" decisions.

Our concern lies in those areas of public policy where matters are not quite so clear, where no conflict has been identified, yet results often differ so much from expectations that even the implementers are shocked and dismayed, especially since everyone thought everything was "going along just fine."

Organizations acquire and spend resources on behalf of individuals, usually on the basis of some specialized variety of scientific or technical knowledge. As such knowledge improves and becomes more extensive, it is curious that services and benefits do not improve correspondingly. Even where services *have* improved, this may not be perceived.

A partial reason for this is that as an organization relies more and more on scientific and technical knowledge for a decision-making basis, it becomes increasingly difficult for that organization to make citizens understand why it supports a particular policy or approach. However, simply because information is complex, technical, and scientific is insufficient reason to assume that the public can't handle it, or that they "won't be interested." As we said earlier—it's a matter of putting it in an understandable form and eliciting a response. Thus, creating and meeting reasonable expectations depends on successful communication.

True communication involves exchange, and exchange requires dealing in commodities which have meaning and merit to all parties involved. The commodity being discussed here is information. It involves ideas and facts about the city, and about lives and how they are lived. Having ideas about the city is a characteristic which organizations and individuals have in common, although the ideas are not necessarily the same and often the "language" in which they are expressed is different.

We see a need in cities for the place and occasion to exchange ideas and images—between users and managers, between individuals and organizations—and a need for the communication of information, through which these actors in the urban setting become visible entities and can have dialogue. The language spoken needs to be in terms of city images—ideas about its present future, about the meaning and direction of urban change as it relates to scientifically generated policies.

Forty D.C. area institutions, each concerned with the operations of some part of the region and how its resources are used, will come together at the Washington Hilton Hotel for the duration of the AAAS Annual Meeting. Each organization will have an exhibit describing what its functions are, what it hopes to do, and why. This group represents a cross section of the institutions concerned with managing human, natural, and mechanical resources for the Washington region. It includes hospitals, local and federal governments, universities, utilities, businesses, and community groups. The information being communicated describes *in particular detail* some aspect of what the organizations are doing in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. Since much of what concerns these groups involves changes in the arrangement of the physical environment, the language they use will be graphic, as our title for the event implies. What we expect to have assembled at the Washington Hilton Hotel is an array of images about the District of Columbia, in the form of plans, maps, proposals, policies, charts, graphs, computer terminals, machines, and also human representatives.

These images will be the contributions of the participating organizations. Individuals also have priorities, expectations, needs, plans, and desires—many of which pertain to the city and those who manage its resources. These are the commodities which need to be exchanged. By inviting the general public to participate in the event, and in a unique "feedback" response experiment, we hope to offer and test a specific means of exchanging regional information.

Capital City Readout reflects our concern as individuals for involving citizens in the processes of urban decision-making, so that human concerns may come to figure more prominently in the formulation of policy. Capital City Readout represents the concern of the AAAS for understanding and enhancing the role of scientific and technical knowledge in resolving social dilemmas, and for making the public aware of their potential. We suspect that "antiscience" and "antitechnology" sentiments being voiced today in many quarters of society are as much a product of misunderstanding and inadequate communications as are the urban disparities discussed above.

Science and technology are tools—resources—which can be employed to various ends. That's what Capital City Readout is about. Its aim is to help people to see what others see, and in so doing help everyone to understand more.