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## PUBLIC INFORMATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS NEEDS:\*

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THERE is a good deal of unhappiness within the technical community about the quality of reporting about nuclear power in both the printed and electronic media. Let me briefly list some of the complaints I have. I believe that I share these complaints with a good many of my colleagues.

Media reporters are required to meet unreasonable deadlines, often at times when no real urgency exists. In a typical situation, I get a telephone call from a reporter who wants a simple answer to a complicated question. I try to be cordial, and invite him to come to my office to review material that I shall set aside for him. He has no background information. It is immediately obvious that he has little or no scientific training. I am apparently his first contact. I indicate that I will be more than happy to spend whatever time is required with him, but I suggest this could best be done after he has spent an hour or so familiarizing himself with a modest amount of reading matter. The reporter replies that this will not be possible because his deadline is only two or three hours off. That ends the interview, and I have no doubt that the reporter will soon find someone who is willing to give him the "one-liner" he is looking for.

Many of us complain that we are expected to take the time to be taped for television or radio interviews, but have no control over what finally appears. All too often, the most useful things we say end up on the cutting room floor. Over the years I have grown camera shy because often a single brief sentence, totally out of context, is all that is aired after an interview that involved many minutes of taping. I believe that unless the interview is going to be published in its entirety, the scientist should be given an opportunity to approve the edited version.

Published letters to the editor are important sources of information for the public. I find that the major newspapers sometimes publish letters that

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are written by people who are very poorly informed. The newspapers should have some system to determine the qualifications of people who write such letters, and the media should give higher priorities to letters from recognized scientists who prepare rebuttals.

Attention should be given to the impact of headlines. I remember my surprise many years ago when I read in the morning newspaper index, "Scientist Killed by Radioactive Waste." On reading the article, I learned that the scientist had run head-on into a truck carrying packaged radioactive waste, but that none of the waste was spilled. He would have been just as dead if the truck had been carrying apples or bananas.

I am amazed at the trivia about radiation that finds its way to the front pages of some of our better papers! Can it be that the press needs better procedures to determine what is important and what is not?

Many of the things I hear and read about atomic energy are factually wrong. The media should be free to editorialize and speculate as they wish. But when they are reporting facts, the facts should be correct. Within the press corps, how serious a matter is it when facts are misstated? Would this reflect unfavorably on the reporter or his editor?

The subject of nuclear *energy* is entwined in many ways with the subject of nuclear *war*. The press should recognize this, and take whatever steps are possible to decouple these subjects in the public mind. A headline that reads "10,000 Anti-Nukes Demonstrate" could just as easily read "10,000 Demonstrate Against Bomb."

The net effect of all the many ways in which biases creep into the handling of the news is that the public is seriously misinformed about the subject of nuclear power. They are unaware that this country is not likely to meet its basic energy requirements in the next century without nuclear power. They are unaware of the excellent safety record of the nuclear power industry. They are unaware that Japan, Finland, Sweden, and France, to mention just a few countries, are moving ahead very rapidly with the development of nuclear power, whereas this country has fallen behind. The public does not understand the relationship between economic and military security and the availability of energy.

Unfortunately, I cannot make constructive suggestions as to how to correct this situation because I do not know enough about the internal workings of the media. Do the media have procedures by which they evaluate their ethical standards of performance? Are there internal procedures by which the objectivity of the leading reporters and television anchormen are judged? Do the newspapers, journals, and radio and

television stations have internal audit mechanisms that examine the factual correctness of published material?

We scientists must learn to do a better job of presenting information to the press, and I believe that it would be in the national interest for the media to examine their relationships with the scientific community in an organized and thorough way. I have no doubt that it can find good advice internally. For example, in my own experience I have had no problems with the major science reporters. But, for some reason, they do not seem to be much involved in the reporting of nuclear news. Instead, the material seems to originate from either reporters off the city desk or from well known byline reporters who somehow get interested in the subject.

I have addressed only the subject of nuclear energy, but many of the same complaints exist in the general area of environmental reporting. Lewis Thomas called attention to the fact that we have grown into a generation of healthy hypochondriacs. Others have referred to the fact that we have become a nation of chicken littles. Exaggerated reports of environmental disasters reach us in one way or another every day. These are matters that should be put into better perspective, and the initiative should come from the media themselves. Unless it already exists unknown to me, it would be in the public interest to undertake a media-sponsored examination in depth of the quality of environmental reporting. It would be best if this were done by a committee under such auspices as the National Academy of Sciences, perhaps in collaboration with the Social Sciences Research Council. The study should seek answers not only to the question of whether the reporting of news is biased, but the kinds of changes that should be made within the media as institutions to improve the quality of their communications to the public on environmental matters.