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THE FIFTH FREEDOM: SCIENTIFIC COMMUNICATION

The United States is about to celebrate its 200th birthday. In case this fact had somehow escaped anyone, the month of July was filled with a host of commemorative activities which served to launch a year-long period of such features intended to culminate on July 4, 1976.

This editorial will serve as our way of contributing to the bicentennial effort, and adding our voice in reaffirmation of the ideals which prompted the American colonists to establish "a new nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all."

One of the basic freedoms or rights which these founding fathers established as a fundamental feature of the new nation was freedom of the press. This concept was novel in its time and even today has not gained acceptance through much of the world. We are proud to be able to say that provision for such expression is embodied in this Journal, not only through our editorials but more broadly through the Open Forum page. This Journal feature constitutes a vehicle for any reader to "sound off" and offer comments and opinions—which, within the most reasonable restrictions, are assured publication without being subject either to editing by the staff or to review by referees.

Mention of the press and the Revolutionary War period also brings to mind the major role played by the public press during colonial times in stimulating thinking, nurturing new concepts, and spreading ideas. Indeed, one can justifiably speculate that in the absence of the public press, the American Revolution might never have come about. Even the most casual or brief reading of history of that period dramatically reveals the tremendous impact of contemporary publications and the importance attached to them by the colonists.

Many other examples could be cited as to the power of the written word in stimulating thought processes and in communicating information whereby progress can be achieved. Not the least of these, by far, is the system which has been employed for the reporting of and dissemination of results of research in the basic and applied sciences. The most prominent element in this system has been the technical journal, of which this Journal is a typical representative.

But in recent years the scientific press generally has fallen upon hard times. Constricting subscription budgets, broad availability of photocopy machines, dropping circulation figures, soaring paper and printing costs, and rising postage rates are just some of the factors which have combined to put a financial squeeze on most technical journals and their publishers.

It is our guess that we shall see at least two effects of this squeeze within the coming decade. First, there will be a major "shake-out" in which most of the weaker journals will fall by the wayside and cease to exist. Second, among surviving journals there will be a substantial change in the mechanical way that they package and transmit the information intended for delivery to the reader; for example, journals may publish only abstracts of papers with the full text on deposit at some central source, or, instead of being printed on paper, journals may be issued entirely on microfiche.

Whatever the shape of things to come, it appears certain that significant changes will occur. In considering these new approaches, in adapting to them, and in accepting them, it is important to recognize that it is only through this means that viable communication can be maintained within the scientific community. To cling to our present system indefinitely will spell doom for the communication of research results generally.

If the scientific press strangles economically, it would be just as disastrous for the future of research as a political edict shutting down the public press would be in abruptly halting the advance of civilization. Hence, it is important for us to recognize that our basic goal is the survival of a system of scientific communication, whatever its eventual format may happen to be.

—EGF