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CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY POLICY

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LaFollette

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Professor Joshua Lederberg
The Rockefeller University
New York, NY 10021-6399

Dear Professor Lederberg:

Your gracious "testimonial" about my book on images of science was encouraging and gratifying. My goal was to connect the study of popular images of science to the concerns of national policymaking for science. To have engaged the interest of someone who has played such an important role in the latter made the nice words especially appreciated.

In answer to your question, your experiences as a reader of books are probably not unusual for those children whose families encouraged it or who lived near good libraries. We have little quantitative data on who actually read books (as opposed to who bought them) but there are market surveys of the large mass-circulation periodicals of that period. In the pages of SEP or Collier's, science was not set apart in a special section, as often done today (cf. the "science segment" on morning television or the "science sections" in newspapers). Even those people who may never have checked out a science book from the local library would probably have read the articles by Hale or Millikan in the latest issue of Scribner's, including the young adults in the household.

There is little quantitative data on the science content of either books or radio. Those books regarded as great literature, such as the de Kruif novels or Arrowsmith, are analyzed by scholars in literary studies, but many of the deconstructionist/pc trends are decidedly anti-science, so they fail to emphasize serious science content in literature (unless the message is negative). We are also missing good analyses of the book series that young people read Since many books were advertised or mentioned in the periodicals of the time, I am convinced that a statistical study of the content of popular books (if one could be done) would show images similar to those I recorded in the magazines, however.

Radio is more problematic because it does usually not "survive" intact. In the Smithsonian Institution Archives there do exist some of the transcripts and original tapes from Watson Davis's "Science Service" broadcasts. Unfortunately, they are in terrible condition, neither indexed nor ordered and the collection is sadly incomplete.

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After the records were given to the Smithsonian by Davis's daughter Audrey, the institution did not apparently recognize the importance of what they had. Much was discarded, and the collection was "cannibalized" (the curators' term) as glossy photos of famous scientists and other scenes were removed and never returned. This loss was especially sad because there had, at one time, been complete files for every broadcast--letters back and forth to the scientists interviewed, scripts and revised scripts, audio tapes, and glossy photos and original drafts for the accompanying press releases. This episode is not so much the fault of the Smithsonian, in particular, as symptomatic of attitudes that see the history of "popular" science or science journalism as less important than the history of organized science.

In answer to your question about the "missing" black scientists, I was thinking of Carver, Washington, and Just. The fact that there were no biographies of blacks in a rather large sample says a great deal about the "invisibility" of even successful, effective, and well-regarded black scientists of that period.

In your comments on the mysterious peak at 1926, you identify what has always been to me the most fascinating aspect of the data. I have gone back many times and looked at the individual articles that compose that peak. It is not an anomaly of publishing, for no one periodical source predominates. The articles are on many different disciplines; no single science dominates. If you are interested, I could pull some of the finer-grained data tables for you. Perhaps you will see something that I have missed.

I sincerely believe that the peak actually reflects the influence of participation by scientists in the process of popularization. There was a dedicated group of scientists who sincerely wanted to promote science for the national good. They were prominent enough to have access to publishers and editors. They were intelligent enough to write interesting articles (and some were quite gifted communicators). They firmly believed that bringing their message before the American public would make a difference. The editors probably also sensed the excitement going on in science. The timing was right and science became a "hot" topic.

I believe this data says a great deal for the importance today of encouraging young scientists to take the time to describe their work to the public. As a member of AAAS's Committee on Public Understanding of Science and Technology, I am firmly committed to the notion, and as someone with an undergraduate degree in physics, I like to think I'm walking proof of the modest usefulness of people who, while not scientists, are empathic to science. More recently, I've been serving on the advisory board for the ACS-funded "Science in American Life" exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Millions of people come to that one museum every year and are likely to see that exhibit. It's an exciting opportunity to present science somewhat as the great magazines did--as an integral and important part of American culture. I have encouraged the curators to get in touch with you and given them a

copy of your article on biographies (hopefully, the exhibit will include many accounts of the lives of scientists).

Your comments on Neustadt and Fineberg are well-taken. It was not a "pc" mistake but genuine ignorance of alternative explanations I will read your article carefully and go back to the N/S book, which perhaps bears reexamination. My intention was to emphasize that modern scientists have ample evidence that the political community often heeds their advice. That circumstance places additional responsibility on scientists to give advice cautiously and with sensitivity to the empirical evidence to date (not the evidence they hope to obtain). This may not be a radical notion but it is one that I know, from my study of mass media coverage, is frequently neglected in the crush of controversy.

Again, thank you for your letter. I will happy to share what data I do have on various popularization activities. You may also want to check with Professor John Burnham, Dept. of History, Ohio State, who knows quite a bit about the history of popularization of science and health.

With best regards,

Marcel LaFollette

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