Letter from the Editor


Matthew Borkoski

Man-eating trees? You won't read about them in SCIENCE NEWS—or about the evil and beneficial influences of the numbers 7 and 13. These topics are on a list of stories that should be handled with care. It was prepared almost 50 years ago by Watson Davis, editor of SCIENCE NEWS LETTER (the forerunner of SCIENCE NEWS). The topics weren't completely forbidden, because "some of the impossible things of today may become possible tomorrow." Indeed, the transmutation of metals, long-range weather forecasting, and drugs for curing obesity have moved from Davis' list into serious scientific, and thus journalistic, consideration.

While the topics have shifted over SCIENCE NEWS' 75 years, the magazine's purpose and writing style, at their best, have remained surprisingly constant. In this anniversary supplement, we pause to glance over our shoulders before accelerating into the coming years. As we peer into a future of instant computer access to ever-growing mountains of information worldwide, we are convinced that our basic goals as journalists will remain much the same. Science writers will continue to sift out the most important and interesting findings and present them to readers in appealing, informative, and thoughtful stories.

Upset by what they regarded as misinformation about science in newspapers and an increasingly superstitious mindset in the U.S. population, the founders of what is now Science Service wanted to convey the process of science and the discoveries of scientists to a wide audience. Today, we work to share with a broad range of readers both the intellectual excitement of science and the accumulating scientific information needed to form opinions about such practical concerns as health and the environment.

Before the days of academic programs in science journalism or even press releases, it was hard for SCIENCE NEWS LETTER to find qualified writers to tackle technical topics. The early writers had degrees in science, and some of the magazine's material was contributed by scientists. Eventually, a staff of full-time writers was hired. Warren Kornberg, who served as managing editor in 1966 and later as editor, insisted that the writers become more professional—that they be as smart about the topics they covered as the scientists were.

Staff writers began to specialize in various branches of science and soon became in-house authorities on them. The next editor, Kendrick Frazier, remembers his task as "having good people and letting them write as they thought best."

Most of those good people in the late 1960s and early 1970s had learned their science as journalists, but soon young people trained as scientists began turning to writing. Many of today's SCIENCE NEWS writers studied science in college or graduate school.

Who are the scientists whose work is grist for science journalists? In the 1920s, the founders wanted to make public the work of "a few hundred, or at most a few thousand, well-trained men equipped with great mental capacity." By 1993, the number of Ph.D. scientists and engineers—men and women—in the United States had reached 700,000.

The scientific community has always been international, and from the start SCIENCE NEWS LETTER covered work done in other countries. As phone service improved, far-flung scientists became more accessible to the Washington staff. The Internet has provided a quantum jump in international communication.

Although SCIENCE NEWS puts the scientific significance and substance of stories ahead of human interest and writing style, its editors have emphasized good writing tailored to the general reader. From the earliest days, stories have been straightforward and sensible. They have put scientific findings in the context of ongoing research and described the experiments that led to the findings.

The elements of science writing now taught in journalism schools were present in the early stories. Leads often had a clever twist that would make them indistinguishable from openings today: "The tsetse fly . . . has been found in Colorado. But there is no cause for alarm, for the flies have been dead and buried for one or two millions of years. . ." (7/4/25). Quotes from scientists peppered the stories: " 'This claim is preposterous,' says Sir Arthur [Keith]. 'The skull is that of a young anthropoid ape [not the missing link]. . .' " (8/1/25). Writers attempted to relate scientific concepts to common experience. Headlines read: "Comet's tail like auto exhaust" and "Microbe hash to cure external tuberculosis." Text explained, "It just can't be spinach that enables Popeye the Sailor to perform all those red-blooded feats in the movies" ("Spinach Over-Rated as Source of Iron," 8/17/35).

While the stories have always been a mix of news reports, briefer items, and longer features, Kornberg created the more formal categories of stories that apply today. He put news stories, thoughtful articles with several sources, in front; the shortest pieces were in the center of the issue; and in the back were features, longer stories that offered more perspective.

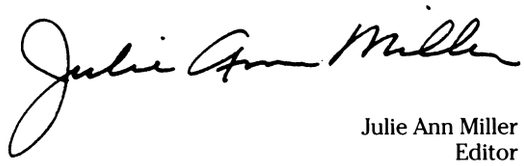
Kornberg wanted stories to be in magazine form—that is, with some background in front of the news—rather than in the inverted pyramid of newspaper stories, which report facts in descending order of importance. He says he targeted the writing to professional scientists reading outside their fields. "The level had to be high, the information solid," he recalls.

Looking back over 75 years of SCIENCE NEWS LETTER and SCIENCE NEWS, one can find descriptions of some advances that served as underpinnings for major research endeavors and of others that were quietly forgotten. "We never used the word 'breakthrough,' because scientific advances are incremental," Frazier says. He argues that the weekly magazine is the best vehicle for showing the step-by-step nature of science without having to exaggerate the importance of any single finding to grab the reader's attention.

What of the future? The science writer will be more valuable than ever in sorting through, and making accessible, information from the ever-increasing number of meetings, journals, and World Wide Web sites. He or she will probably be trained in a particular science, if not in science journalism as well, and will be respected for good writing, whether in traditional media or in stories layered on Web pages.

New technology will increase the immediacy of stories. Many scientists around the world can already be contacted by E-mail, thus lowering barriers of distance and time zones. Whereas earlier writers had to wait for illustrations to arrive by mail, photograph space shots from the television screen, or arrange for art to be carried by flight attendants from distant airports to D.C., today's journalists can download photos and diagrams from a computer screen.

Forecasting the direction of scientific activity, an annual feature of earlier issues, remains even trickier than long-range weather prediction. In this 75th anniversary issue, however, SCIENCE NEWS writers describe a selection of ideas, many considered fanciful just yesterday, that they expect to become fruitful topics of scientific enterprise tomorrow.



Julie Ann Miller
Editor