

A report on the first year / COPUS.

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Committee on the Public Understanding of Science.
Royal Institution of Great Britain.
British Association for the Advancement of Science.
Royal Society (Great Britain)

Publication/Creation

London : COPUS, 1986

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A REPORT ON THE FIRST YEAR

In September 1985 the Royal Society published the report* of an *ad hoc* group (chairman: Sir Walter Bodmer) that had been considering the current state of the public understanding of science, and why and how the general levels of understanding (including the methods, concepts and applications of science and technology) might be improved. The Bodmer Report made far-reaching recommendations aimed at all parts of society—education, industry, government, the media and, by no means least, the scientific community. It stressed particularly the role of scientists and scientific institutions in presenting science and technology to the public.

In line with one of the strongest recommendations in the report, the Royal Society, with the British Association for the Advancement of Science and the Royal Institution, established in December 1985 a Committee on the Understanding of Science by the Public (COPUS). The Committee provides a focus for the broad-ranging programme needed to improve scientific awareness in the UK, through the monitoring, encouragement and promotion of the public understanding of science and its impact on society, and through assistance to scientific institutions and organizations. The membership reflects the many groups involved in the provision, transmission or reception of information about science—the scientific community, industry, Parliament, education, media, museums, etc. Current members are:

- Sir George Porter (chairman) (President of the Royal Society)
- Sir David Attenborough (Broadcaster and author)
- Professor R.J. Blin-Stoyle (Professor of Theoretical Physics, University of Sussex)
- Sir Walter Bodmer (Director of Research, Imperial Cancer Research Fund)
- Mr P. Bonner (Controller of Programmes, Channel 4 Television)
- Dr N. Cossons (Director of the Science Museum)
- Dr D.C. Evered (Director of the Ciba Foundation)
- Professor M.J. Frazer (Chief Officer, Council for National Academic Awards)
- Professor R.L. Gregory (Director, Bristol Exploratory, and Professor of Neuropsychology in the University of Bristol)
- Lord Gregson (Member of the Lords' Select Committee on Science and Technology)
- Sir David Hancock (Permanent Secretary to the Department of Education and Science)
- Mr M. Kenward (Editor, *New Scientist*)
- Sir Edwin Nixon (Chairman, IBM (UK) Ltd)
- Lord Perry (Fellow and formerly Vice-Chancellor, The Open University)
- Ms Jane Reed (Managing Editor (Features), *Today* Newspaper)
- Dr R. Reid (Chairman, Dumbarton Films Ltd)
- Sir Denis Rooke (Chairman of British Gas plc; President of the Fellowship of Engineering)
- Professor J.M. Thomas (Director of the Royal Institution)

COPUS meets three or four times a year. In its first two meetings it has concentrated on considering the most appropriate *modus operandi*, the priority areas for attention, and the best means of enhancing the understanding of science. The Committee will operate in three ways:

- (a) initiating and running activities itself;
- (b) recommending initiatives to the sponsoring bodies and monitoring the subsequent activities;
- (c) monitoring, encouraging, promoting and, where appropriate, coordinating activities of other bodies.

The Committee has considered a broad range of mechanisms by which it, or other organizations, might promote the public understanding of science, including talks and lectures, seminars, prizes, extra-curricular school activities, adult education, articles in the press, television, books and magazines, museums, exhibitions and science fairs. A number of specific areas of activity have been considered.

**The public understanding of science*, The Royal Society 1985, price £6.95.

- (i) The need to enhance the 'image' of science, to influence the attitudes of the public and of decision-makers in industry and government. The Committee has discussed the merit of there being a Public Relations Officer for Science to initiate activities (and to coordinate those of others) aimed at presenting science effectively.
- (ii) The Committee has been charged by the Royal Society with administering a new medal, the Michael Faraday Award, to be presented annually to the practising scientist (or scientists) who has done most to promote, in the UK, the public understanding of science.
- (iii) A scheme of fellowships to enable academic scientists to work in news media organizations for periods of a month or two is being developed, to be organized by the British Association. The aim is to assist scientists to discover how the media work and encourage them to contribute (and to stimulate their colleagues to contribute) more to writing about their science in the future.
- (iv) Proposals for meetings of scientists and producers of TV science programmes are under consideration, to discuss the opportunities and constraints of presenting science through TV and to explore the potential of this very important medium of communication. The Committee sees such meetings as a first step in a series of initiatives in the area of science and TV.
- (v) The Committee keeps under review the activities of the Royal Society-Association of British Science Writers joint committee in organizing press seminars on topics of a scientific nature of particular interest to the press or scientists. Three seminars, on AIDS, on animal experiments and on national performance in basic research, have been held; a fourth, on optical processing, is to be held in early 1988. The Committee will wish to develop, in particular, linkage between these seminars and the Ciba Media Resource Service (which provides the media with the names of scientists able to speak on particular issues) and also the production of briefing documents after each seminar for distribution to the press and others.
- (vi) The role of the education system, especially during the compulsory stage, is of special importance. The Committee strongly supports the introduction of science at primary levels, the adoption of a 'science for all' policy up to age 16, and a broadening of sixth-form studies to include both the arts and the sciences. The Committee will look at extra-curricular initiatives, such as the British Association Young Scientists, the Royal Institution masterclasses and lectures, and opportunities for teachers to expand their knowledge of the applications of science. It will keep in close touch with the educational activities of the sponsoring bodies.
- (vii) The enormous positive response to the Bodmer Report from learned societies, higher education and individuals demonstrated the very great support for the Committee's work and the wide range of activities currently being carried out. The Committee recognizes that it has an important and major responsibility to encourage these efforts, to assist through prestige, advice or financial support, to enable related initiatives to benefit from each other, and to spread 'good practice'. In part this will be the task of the PRO for Science (see (i) above).
- (viii) Museums and exhibitions, especially 'hands-on' exhibitions such as the Bristol Exploratory and the Science Museum 'Launch Pad', can be very successful in stimulating the public to enjoy and learn from science. The Committee proposes to discuss with directors of museums the opportunities for presenting science and other services that the museums can provide, nationally and locally, to assist in the public understanding of science.
- (ix) The Committee has identified three further priority areas which it will take up over the next year: (a) industry and commerce—aimed at influencing decision-makers on such matters as staff education and training, relations with the public and the education system, and management policies, especially in relation to the contribution of science to economic prosperity; (b) Parliament—in particular how to provide members of both Houses with objective, factual information on scientific aspects of current legislative debate; and (c) Government and the civil service—again aimed at the mechanisms for ensuring that knowledgeable and speedy advice is available as an input to policy decisions.

COPUS will continue to issue reports on its activities. It would also welcome comments on its work and ideas for its future direction. These should be addressed to the Assistant Secretary (National Affairs), The Royal Society, 6 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AG.

December 1986