

Copyright and Research Funding  
Have Some Interesting Points  
in Common

February 27, 1974

Number 9

The copyright problem, and the matter of royalties, seems to command little attention in the scientific community. Is this the tactic of ignoring something to make it go away? The road to discovery is thorny enough. Researchers prefer not to be bothered with insignificant nettles like presumptive 'ownership' of a so-easily photocopied journal article. A recent article in *Science* seems to substantiate this opinion.<sup>1</sup>

The Nixon Administration may be doing its best to frustrate American biomedical research altogether. But it is note-worthy that in the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia the decision *against* Williams & Wilkins, the journal publisher, expressed concern lest too-involved methods of compensation of proprietary interests interfere with biomedical research. (That concern with *method* neatly skirts the issue). How quickly a new technique becomes indispensable! No one is willing to entertain the idea that research can nowadays proceed without photocopying ad lib or ad nauseam.

In the Scandinavian countries, there is an interesting and different approach. Since photocopying may be regarded as a mere technical variation of inter-library loan, or indeed of direct borrowing by the reader, authors are compensated by a payment of a fixed percentage of the state's contribution to library support. In Denmark, the rate is six per cent. The money is put into a fund of the Danish Union of Writers.

In the other countries, the funds are similarly distributed to writers' groups for scholarships, pensions, etc. The specific allocations, and their mechanics, however, are not really germane to my central thesis.

With the systems of compensation in use, Scandinavia properly recognizes and rewards the role and contribution of its writers, scientific and otherwise. It recognizes as well that without such reward technology itself deprives some researchers, many authors and most publishers of an important incentive to continue their work. It is significant that "non-profit" publishers are more concerned than most for-profit ones.

I see in all this a parallel to my suggestion that a fixed percentage of the GNP or, preferably, of national and state health-care budgets be pledged to the funding of biomedical research. Can any reasonable person deny that research is the source of new wealth in a technological society? Certainly it is counterargued that research—even biomedical research—simply creates more problems for us now than it solves. Why prolong life, if in accomplishing it, we merely increase for society a medical and sociological burden it cannot even now handle.

Yet it seems to me the die was cast long ago when men decided they preferred not to die from such 'natural' deaths as smallpox, cholera, or whatever. That being the case, the argument that biomedical research is more a

problem-maker than problem-solver is irrelevant, even were it true. For to maintain the present precarious balance between man and nature requires a continually refined scientific expertise, with or without great breakthroughs. By that, I mean we need a scientific intelligentsia merely to survive in a technological world, as well as to protect us from the unpredictable onslaughts that nature and our own assaults on nature can bring down upon us. Some lethal viral mutant may appear today or tomorrow. We may not have to wait for spontaneous mutation to produce them--we have been warned that they can be made, accidentally or otherwise, in the laboratory.

I am reminded of a conversation I had many years ago with some biochemists from Africa. Considering their countries' national economies, I found their research excessively esoteric and wondered how they could justify support of it. I was told that they considered themselves the scientific eyes and ears of their nations, always ready to deal with whatever unforeseen problems might arise. Smiling, one of them quoted Hamlet to me. The readiness is all.

Society pays a very nominal fee to encourage creativity among its creative people. Whatever the form--royalties, subsidies, scholarships--the payment

should be seen as long-term investment, at worst as some form of insurance. We are glad to pay for insurance against a bewildering variety of possibilities, and are even more glad when we escape the misfortunes that might require a return on it. Public health and public wealth--public welfare in all its ramifications--surely require and deserve insurance, if we are so short-sighted that we cannot see the wisdom of investing in them.

Insurance provides a mechanism for sharing costs of disaster; research can do even more. It can eventually reduce the costs of disaster, if it cannot prevent them entirely. Thus, automobile insurance spreads the costs of accidents among all insured drivers. Accident research, which ought to be financed in part from auto insurance premiums, would undoubtedly reduce the incidence and severity of accidents. Biomedical research can and does reduce the incidence and severity of disease.

A new lobby established to promote the concept of biomedical research as established policy is slowly becoming a reality. A number of *Current Contents*® readers have responded to my plea<sup>2</sup> to support such a lobby. As promised, I am reminding you again to contact me directly or write to the Committee on Impact of Biomedical Research, 2128 Wyoming Avenue, N. W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

1. Henry, N.L. Copyright, public policy, and information technology. *Science* 183 (4123):384-91, 1974.

2. Garfield, E. Biomedical and health care systems research should be financed from social security and health insurance funds; a permanent lobby could swing it. *Current Contents* No. 3, 16 January 1974, p. 5-7.