

Current Comments

Omni Magazine leads the upsurge of mass-audience science journalism

Number 11

March 12, 1979

Last summer I told you that science journalism in the mass media was at best minimal.¹ Maybe someone was listening! Surprisingly, over the past months an extraordinary change has taken place. The media has noticed the "growth of popular appetite for lucid descriptions and explanations of modern research and its findings."² New science magazines are in the planning stage. Television networks have announced the preparation of science series. And I know one producer who is planning a science based series of films for public television.

Perhaps this recent flurry of activity derives to some extent from the initial success of *Omni*, a magazine described by its publisher as "an original if not controversial mixture of science fact, fiction, fantasy and the paranormal."³

At this writing, six monthly issues of *Omni* have been published. The magazine is the brainchild of Bob Guccione of the Penthouse publishing empire. Kathy Keeton is associate publisher. In its first month of operation, *Omni* recorded more than 1 million newsstand sales at \$2.00 a copy.

Omni's advertising rates range from more than \$6,000 a page for a black and white ad, to more than \$9,000 for a color ad. While the initial issue attracted some fifty pages of ads, subsequent issues have averaged about 25. *Omni's* first demographic study shows that the majority of its readership is 18 to 34-year-olds with at least some college and an average income of \$19,300. This is a group that many advertisers wish to reach.

In light of these facts, *Omni's* appearance cannot be considered a minor event in science journalism. Yet, if one judges by the amount of attention paid to *Omni* by the "establishment" science press, one would think its birth was no more significant than that of some small, esoteric journal. In other words, *Omni* has been all but ignored. One might expect this from a competitor like *Scientific American* but not *Science*, *Nature*, *Chemical & Engineering News*, and others. But apparently it is not unusual for members of the fourth estate to ignore new arrivals on the publishing scene.

Perhaps the most unusual feature about *Omni* is its inclusion of

science fiction. Each issue contains about 125 pages of editorial matter. One third of these pages are devoted to science fiction. Stories by authors such as Isaac Asimov, Theodore Sturgeon, Ron Goulart, and James B. Hall, all well-known to science fiction buffs, appeared in the first *Omni* issue. Since then, four stories by other authors have appeared in each issue.

Another third of *Omni's* pages are devoted to fourteen monthly columns or departments. The departments cover topics such as science books and films and science fiction, as well as subjects like environment and astronomy. For example, "Life" is a monthly biomedical feature written by Bernard Dixon, editor of the British publication *New Scientist*. He covers a variety of "Life" oriented subjects—sometimes more than one in an issue. Dixon has written on the World Health Organization's effort to eliminate small pox from the earth;⁴ on how examining white blood cells will give clues to our ancestry and identity;⁵ on newly discovered "sensory abilities" of plants;⁶ and on the origins of HeLa cells, which are used to diagnose virus infections.⁷

A feature called "Continuum," made up of short news items and at least one signed opinion piece, is also included. In each issue the opinion pieces endorse positions, urge action, or discuss issues. The "imminent uncontrolled descent of Skylab,"⁸ the possibility of patenting genetic life,⁹ and the exporting of harmful technology from the US¹⁰ are some of the topics that

have been covered in this column. Short news items in "Continuum" have revealed the location of Einstein's brain,¹¹ discussed the cloning of grapes,¹² and commented on synthetic pot. In the latter we are told that synthetic pot is "proving remarkably effective against a wide variety of serious illnesses" without pot's "unfortunate side effects."¹³

Unfortunately, the February "Continuum" item on "The Information Explosion"¹⁴ is a disaster. The publishers assure me, however, that more stringent refereeing procedures will be used in the future.

"UFO Update" is a monthly column by NASA scientist James Oberg. In his column, Oberg presents the point of view of those who observed UFOs and those who would explain away the sightings. In the December issue, for example, he describes how the planet Venus may have been mistaken for a UFO in several sightings.¹⁵ January's "UFO Update" discusses the Coyne helicopter incident. In this sighting, an army helicopter crew reported interception by a UFO which may have been a meteor.¹⁶ The case of Barney and Betty Hill, a couple who claimed to have been abducted and returned by aliens, was covered in the November issue.¹⁷ February's column dealt with UFO reports filed by professional astronomers.¹⁸

Articles, interviews, and photofeatures make up the remainder of the magazine. Many articles in *Omni* can be characterized as speculative science. They ask questions that cannot yet be answered, but also give information

on the research done on the subject to date. For example, November's issue contained an article on "The Real Bionic Man."¹⁹ This turned out to be a summary of research being done at the University of Utah to develop "prostheses that mimic human body parts as closely as possible."¹⁹ An article in January on controlling gravity says that in the future it will be possible to harness this force. The article outlines a theoretical basis for the author's conclusions using established scientific principles.²⁰ "Some of Us May Never Die" summarizes research into anti-aging drugs, the relationship between nutrition and aging, genetic causes of aging, and other age-related topics.²¹ In the February issue, an article called "An End to Pain" reports on scientific discoveries relieving pain and how these may be used in the future for complete pain relief.²² March's *Omni* looks at the future of space travel, indicating that commercial passenger space flights might be in the not-too-distant future.²³

Several *Omni* articles deal with political influences on science and technology. The politics of solar energy is explored in one article;²⁴ the effect of federal funding on projects to listen for life in space is examined in another commentary.²⁵

Omni also discusses politics within the scientific community. Author William Stuckey's piece on the Nobel Prize is a case in point.²⁶ Stuckey discusses the politics of winning that award. The article was particularly interesting to me since I was mentioned in it as "the cunning mogul of library science" who

"introduced a number system to the vaguely verbal Nobel world...." In another place in the article he called me the "mustachioed, matrix-loving Garfield" even though I haven't sported a mustache for many years. The picture accompanying the article clearly shows me without one.

Although the Nobel article and a subsequent piece focusing on two prize winners are the closest I've seen in *Omni* to articles dealing with the sociology of science, the magazine does add to our knowledge of individual scientists, inventors, and futurists through interviews. For example, in November, *Omni* interviewed Alvin Toffler, the author of *Future Shock*.²⁷ In other interviews *Omni* spoke to I. J. Good,²⁸ a mathematician, who discussed the role of speculation in science; physicist Freeman Dyson²⁹ who imagines "an artificial biosphere," an environment where man can exist in space; Ralph Barnaby,³⁰ a pioneer of flight; Edward O. Wilson,³¹ author of *Sociobiology*; and Arthur C. Clarke,³² author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Omni is a beautiful magazine to browse through. Incredible time and energy have been given to graphics. Bob Guccione is in fact the design director and designed the covers and clever logo. However, this emphasis on graphics is sometimes achieved at the expense of information. *Omni's* table of contents, for example, takes up an entire page, but provides very little information. For example, a piece entitled "The Star of the

Magi"³³ was listed on the contents page merely as "Space: Astronomy." The author's name was not even listed. This approach is quite opposite to that of most newsstand magazines which try to liven up their contents pages with photos and annotations.

Current Contents[®] will have to compose special contents pages for *Omni* until their contents pages become more informative. We have a similar problem with *Nature* and other journals that omit important information from the contents pages such as editorials or letters to the editor.

The full-color illustrations, reproductions, and pictures included in *Omni* give the magazine an elegant touch. Each issue contains at least one photofeature. In January, eleven pages of full-color photos from the 40-year career of a scientific journalist, Fritz Goro were presented.³⁴ In the same issue, a photograph by Paul Brierley of the spectrum of color emitted by a videodisc was spectacularly revealed.³⁵

Managing editor Frank Kendig claims that *Omni* has received a positive reaction from scientists. Kendig, formerly managing editor of *Saturday Review of the Sciences* and editor of *Science Digest*, had been concerned that the scientific community would react negatively to a "very flashy" mass audience magazine.³⁶ However, a letter from Philip Handler, president of the National Academy of Science, said, "*Omni* is handsome and attractive, esthetically and intellectually. The

concept of deliberately packaging summaries of the best current science with the best of science fiction is also attractive."³⁷

Of greater significance is the reaction of experts in various scientific fields who called the editors and offered to write articles on their specialties. Since *Omni* is written mainly by free-lance writers, it is important that they have a large reservoir of specialists available to write and referee their editorial matter. However, *Omni* has no plans to change its editorial mix in the near future. With such a fine reception, why tamper with success? For this reason, Kendig is not unduly concerned about the lack of discussion of *Omni* in the established science publications.³⁶

It is apparent to me, as I said earlier, that the science press has not adequately recognized *Omni*. Scientists and science writers have lamented the lack of science journalism for the public. Every new venture creates an outlet for science journalists. *Science* and *New Scientist* are the only two science publications to even mention the new magazine. Some publications, like *Science News*, did not mention *Omni*'s debut because their policy is not to prepare reviews of competing magazines. On the other hand, while *Chemical & Engineering News* would probably review a new popular chemistry magazine, it does not intend to review *Omni* no matter how much chemistry it covers, and the same is true for *Physics Today*. The editors of the scholarly journals we contac-

ted did not feel that it was appropriate to review a "popular" magazine within their pages.

A review by *New Scientist* was not entirely unexpected since Bernard Dixon, the editor, is the European editor of *Omni*. Reviewer Barry Norman called *Omni* "rather impressive," and listed the articles that appeared in the initial issue. He said that the "articles generally are informative rather than stylish and distinctly light on humor."³⁸

Science had a brief commentary on *Omni* which concentrated on one story—the Nobel Prize piece I already described. As *Science* put it, "The one-two-three's of walking away with a Nobel are spelled out...in an article replete with predictions of the 1978 Nobel Prize winners."³⁹ *Science* has mentioned *Omni* in passing elsewhere, but has never fully reviewed the magazine. Although the Nobel article was interesting, I think this is hardly an adequate way to introduce the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) members to a new science magazine.

Was *Science*'s non-treatment of *Omni* influenced by other factors? The AAAS has announced plans to introduce a new science magazine of its own, *Science '79*, also catering to a mass audience consisting of college-educated adults. The magazine, "conceived as a vehicle for enhancing public understanding of science" will be aimed at an educated audience, but one untrained in science.⁴⁰ Like *Omni*, it will carry articles and news col-

umns, and use four-color illustrations and photographs. Unlike *Omni*, the AAAS magazine will contain only science fact, no science fiction. It will have to compete with *Omni* for advertising dollars being spent to reach readers in the 18-34 age bracket. *Science Digest* and *Science News* already reach the high school market. *Scientific American* is geared to the scientist and engineer.

To top things off, Time, Inc. is considering a science magazine aimed "at the intelligent layman who has little science background."⁴¹ I also learned that the publishing firm VNU of the Netherlands may soon be coming out with a monthly science magazine called *Eureka*!⁴² The magazine will be aimed at US readers. Because the venture is so new, publisher's representatives were hesitant about releasing any additional details.

These ventures are only a few indications of the media's awareness of the rising public interest in science. In November, the *New York Times* introduced "Science Times," a section of science news which appears in its regular Tuesday edition. "Science Times" recently featured interviews with leading scientists about the challenges to science in 1979, a report on the AAAS annual meeting, a discussion of a search for artifacts aboard a ship that sank in the Arctic, a story about research into suicide among the aged, and an investigative report on routine fetal monitoring.

In November, *The Economist*, a well-known British political and business weekly magazine, also started a science and technology section. This section has reported on new discoveries about Venus that have come from photographs taken from space, the French breeder reactor, a drug to help glaucoma victims, and microcomputers.

Science News, a weekly magazine that reports activities in science and technology to a mass audience, has experienced a rapid increase in circulation recently. As its editor, Robert J. Trotter, pointed out, in 1978 it hit an "all-time high in circulation—175,164—representing an increase of more than 80 percent over the past five years."⁴³ *Science News* costs \$15.50 for a one year subscription. Like *Science Digest* it is heavily oriented toward the high school market.

Another magazine that has experienced a recent increase in interest is *The Sciences*, published by the New York Academy of Sciences. This publication has been around for almost twenty years.⁴⁴ However, under its new editor Robert Ubell it has been redesigned as a full-fledged newsstand magazine. *The Sciences* is aimed at the Academy's membership, working scientists who want to find out about other fields and literate non-scientists who are interested in scientific subjects. Unlike *Omni*, it presents non-fiction only. Its stories are designed to be informative, not speculative. It is sold by subscrip-

tion and on the newsstand and has a circulation of over 30,000.

The trend towards science journalism has not escaped television programming executives. The CBS television network is reportedly preparing a pilot for a weekly science program for prime-time (between the hours of 7 p.m. and 11 p.m.).⁴⁵ The program, designed for adults, will be formatted much like CBS' "60 Minutes." Four segments on popular science topics will be included in each program. I also understand that the Public Broadcasting Service, sponsors of the successful *Nova* series, will be introducing a new archaeology and social anthropology program in 1980. The program will feature one-hour documentary stories "about the world of human beings,"⁴⁶ according to Michael Ambrosino, executive producer of the series and president of Public Broadcasting Associates, producers of the program.

Children, too, may be getting a science program next year. The Children's Television Workshop is planning a program aimed at introducing 8 to 12-year-olds to science.⁴⁷ Each weekly program will be organized around extremes. For example, one week the program will cover growth and decay, the next hot and cold.

In Canada, radio listeners will soon be able to tune in a five minute syndicated newscast on scientific and technological discoveries and developments. The program, called *Discovery*, will be broadcast over

regular commercial stations, according to broadcast journalist Malcolm Dean.⁴⁸

These happenings in the mass media usher in an exciting new era in mass-audience science reporting. At ISI® we have always been interested in helping our readers both maintain a broad interdisciplinary awareness and find out how the popular press views them and their work. In a large part, these are the goals of ISI's Press Digest. To further this aim, I feel that scientists

should be aware of the articles contained in popular science magazines such as *Omni* and *The Sciences*. Accordingly, ISI will be adding coverage of them to *Current Contents® /Arts & Humanities*, *Current Contents/Life Sciences*, *Current Contents/Physical, Chemical & Earth Sciences*, and the *Science Citation Index®*. We will begin covering *Omni* and *The Sciences* immediately. We hope you will find the contents pages of these magazines informative and useful.

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