Current Comments

SIPI: Scientists Taking Scientific Information to the Public

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Reporters who were in Middletown, Pennsylvania, during the Three Mile Island nuclear accident agree that it was a tough story to cover. They had to sift through government and utility officials' confusing and often contradictory explanations of what was happening. They weren't sure if the malfunctioning-reactor story would turn into a mass-evacuation story. They were even uncertain about the extent of the danger to themselves. On top of all that, most of them had a limited scientific background. Understandably, they felt as though they were groping in the dark about the technological aspects of nuclear power and safety.[1]

Eighty-four news organizations tried to get around that last problem by calling the Scientists' Institute for Public Information (SIPI), headquartered in New York City. SIPI is a non-profit organization that puts reporters in touch with scientists who can answer their questions. SIPI was founded in 1963 by Margaret Mead, Barry Commoner, René Dubos, and other scientists. They recognized a need for an organization that could impartially communicate information to nonspecialists about scientific topics of concern.

SIPI has over 2,000 names filed and cross-referenced by disciplines. They are all scientists who have told SIPI that they are willing to talk to reporters. Before the Three Mile Island incident, SIPI averaged about 50 calls a week from reporters. Now it gets over 75, according to public information officer Fred Jerome. Jerome attributes this in part to a mention of SIPI in a *New York Times* story about reporters' difficulties in covering Three Mile Island.[2] But the number of calls has increased steadily over the years.

Jerome says most of the reporters who call SIPI want answers to questions about energy. Between March 5 and 9 SIPI referred dozens of journalists to scientists. *Business Week* was concerned about nuclear waste. The *New York Daily News* was writing a story on synthetic fuels. The Associated Press was pursuing energy consumption and water pollution regulations, while the *Wall Street Journal* was preparing a story on toxic chemical dumps and nuclear waste. The *Bergen* (New Jersey) *Record* wanted a referral on dioxin, and *The Nation* sought an expert on radiation and health. Even the *New York Times* turned to SIPI on transportation. So did *Times* columnist Tom Wicker's office (on science and criminal justice), *Omni* (on solar power and DNA), *Medical World News* (on occupational health), and the CBS television news program *60 Minutes* (on the atomic bomb). Between July 3 and 7, SIPI also counted 17 calls about Skylab.

SIPI also arranges interviews with specialists for newspapers, magazines, and evening news programs. It's able to do this fairly quickly, which is useful to

journalists working under tight deadlines. The scientist-reporter liaison program is supervised by a "media advisory board," composed of print and broadcast journalists, scientific journal editors, and others.

SIPI's "media outreach" program is probably the most visible of its activities. Jerome says SIPI plans to increase both the funding and the number of scientists involved in the program. He points out that SIPI not only wants to aid reporters in emergencies, but wants to get out information on scientific issues *before* they become emergencies.

Thus, SIPI does other things to get scientific information to the public. It publishes, in cooperation with the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation, the 10-times-yearly magazine *Environment*, which covers ecological issues in a clear, readable style. Recent issues include articles on pesticides,[3] food additives,[4] and environmental issues facing Congress.[5] In December 1978 *Environment* began a short feature called the "Carcinogen File," which summarizes present knowledge on chemicals that have been implicated as cancer-causing agents, such as benzo(*a*)pyrene.[6] The column also covers other cancer-related topics, such as the controversy over the Ames test as a method of determining which substances are carcinogens.[7] *Environment* is covered in *Current Contents®/Agriculture, Biology & Environmental Sciences* and *Current Contents/Social & Behavioral Sciences*. It is also indexed in the *Science Citation Index® (SCI®)*.

SIPI's other major publication is its newsletter, *SIPIscope*, which Jerome edits. It includes news about SIPI activities but also serves as a discussion forum. In recent issues the Brooklyn Union gas company president discussed methane as a fuel source[8] and the mayor of Middletown wrote about Three Mile Island.[9] A year's subscription to *Environment* and *SIPIscope* comes with a $25 associate membership in SIPI.

Another foray into the realm of science journalism was the establishment in May 1978 of the SIPI Student Science Journalism Fellowships. Among the financial backers are the Eleanor Patterson Foundation in Washington, DC, the *New York Times* Foundation, and *Politics Today* magazine (formerly *Skeptic*). The first three fellows will be three New York University students. They are Vivien Orbach and Christine D'Onofrio from the New York University journalism school, and Dina Rosenberg Loewy from the nutrition department. They'll receive $1,000 from SIPI and four academic credits from NYU. This fall Orbach will report on the abuse of psychoactive drugs by American women, D'Onofrio on the implications of nuclear and solar power for employment, and Loewy on nutritional standards and the national food stamp program. SIPI will publish their reports in booklet form and make them available on request. So far NYU is the only university that has participated in this program.

Apart from its media-related activities, SIPI pursues its objectives through various task forces on controversial topics of public concern. These task forces organize research projects and debates, and SIPI publishes the results in book form. The idea is to keep open discussion going until a synthesis is reached on how to deal with complex problems. Current projects include an evaluation of the use of computers in law enforcement, an education and research project on methane as a fuel source, and an analysis of the effects of government regulation on the oil industry. Some past projects included seminars for congressmen on recombi-

nant DNA research,[10] natural gas,[11] and the economics of nuclear power.[12] Transcripts of SIPI's congressional seminars are distributed to members of Congress.

SIPI also recently took part in a conference to assess the public's view of technology in the wake of Three Mile Island. SIPI sponsored the meeting at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government with the Harvard Center for Science and International Affairs and the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. About 20 people attended the meeting to debate whether the public has lost confidence in science and technology and, if so, what should be done about it. The one-day meeting, attended by Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology faculty members, was covered in *Science*.[13]

One of the most ambitious of SIPI's present undertakings is a plan to help the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) encourage citizen participation in TVA's plans to store nuclear waste. SIPI, working under a TVA contract, will be holding public meetings and discussions with unions, city governments, environmental groups, and other organizations. This is to let the citizens of the seven states in the TVA region have a say in how nuclear waste is disposed.

SIPI operates the Margaret Mead Internship in Policy Related Science to aid and complement the various programs of its task forces and committees. The program, which began two years before Mead's death, is "the only program to which she has ever agreed to lend her name."[14] So far 15 persons have participated in the program, which is open to all undergraduate science students. The interns spend at least 10 weeks working on a SIPI committee. They are also encouraged to develop their own research projects and reports on their work. One intern recently looked at the advantages of and barriers to "cogeneration," the use of energy which would otherwise be wasted.[15] Mead intern and science journalism fellow reports are summarized in *SIPIscope*.

The president of SIPI is Alan McGowan. An engineer, he has been science administrator for the Center for the Biology of Natural Systems of Washington University in St. Louis. He also chaired the subcommittee on alternative energy sources for the Governor's Task Force on Energy Problems in New York City. I spoke to Alan in New York last spring, and decided that ISI® could be of help to SIPI. They now have the *SCI* at their fingertips to help supplement the information in their files. Among SIPI's past presidents are Margaret Mead, geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky, and mathematician Warren Weaver. McGowan, who has been president for about five years, is the first to make it a full-time job.

One of SIPI's vice-chairmen was cofounder Barry Commoner. He is, of course, well known for his controversial stands on energy and environmental issues. Throughout his 16 years as a member of SIPI, Commoner "agreed that SIPI's role should be distinct from his role" as an environmentalist and activist, Jerome tells us. Recently, Commoner has taken an indefinite leave of absence because of personal and professional pressures as well as political activities.

Margaret Mead commented in 1977 about a perceived barrier to SIPI's role as a source of unbiased scientific information. "We hear it often at SIPI," she wrote, " 'No one is going to give you money just to provide scientific *information* to the public. You've got to get a cause. But the idea that people should make up their own minds based on the facts is out of style.' I refuse to accept

this pessimistic appraisal of democracy."[16]

Today we are witnessing a growth in the amount of newspaper, television, and magazine space devoted to science.[17] This is accompanied by many front page news stories relevant to science and technology—nuclear energy, Skylab, the DC-10, asbestos-spreading hair-dryers, carcinogens in food, drugs, and the environment, and others. In such times, *unbiased* sources of scientific information such as SIPI are very valuable to news organizations and to the public. Since scientists can be biased about science, SIPI's Board includes people who can view its activities from the viewpoint of the non-scientist.

SIPI depends on its membership fees and donations from contributors. Tax deductible donations to support SIPI's efforts to bring science to the public can be sent to SIPI, 355 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

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