

Anyone who reads the English language newspapers and magazines will immediately notice the lack of science related news stories and features. While newspapers will devote several pages and even special supplements to fashion and food, it is rare to find a story reporting on the latest development in science and technology (S&T). On the face of it, this is really paradoxical. The average newspaper reader today experiences science and technology far more than her counterpart even a decade ago. Whether it is the Internet, mobile phones, multimedia or satellite television, technology certainly impinges on our everyday existence in an unprecedented way today. So why is it that newspapers find it not worthwhile to report regularly on scientific and technological developments? Is it really true that people are not interested in science related stories, but would rather read about the latest health fad among Hollywood stars?

There is presumably a large section of the readership which would like reportage on science topics. This is evident from the readership of Science Reporter(some 70,000 copies, each one being read by several youngsters) as well as the immense popularity, (though restricted to the educated elite) of the Discovery and National Geographic Channels. And what about the UGC science programs? Aimed at the high school and college going students who do not have access to learning resources, these were telecast for over a decade. Has any study been carried out of the impact of UGC programs? How popular or effective were the programs among the target audiences, namely school and college students? The success of Hawking's and other books tells us that maybe people will read science related stories if they are made sufficiently accessible. Among the newspapers, The Hindu has been carrying a weekly science page for many years. Has it not been successful? What about the Telegraph which also has a weekly science page?

Even for the moment accepting the "masala-film, we-give-what-the-readers-want" approach of newspapers, one can certainly ask, "is it not incumbent on the media to introduce their readers/viewers to new ideas and dimensions of life?" If so, then why is technology and science, so neglected, even if we assume that the lowest common denominator is not interested in these topics. Given that the next millennia is going to be so dominated by technology which is going to impact in a central way in our lives, is it not important for the media to make their readers/viewers more S&T friendly?

And what about the quality of coverage which exists? Most of the features or news that is published in the media is reprinted from foreign newspapers or magazines. This in itself is not bad but why is there so little coverage of the work being done in our own country? Whether it is a revolutionary treatment for kala-azar, or a modest innovation in fly ash technology done by some Regional Research Lab., or even the reverse engineering of certain molecules by some local drug company, why does it never find any place in our media? After all, we do have the third largest pool of scientific and technical human resources in the world. We also have a huge scientific establishment in the form of CSIR laboratories and the universities, not to talk of the defence and atomic energy and space establishments. The point is not to glorify everything that is done in our country but to try and place the research in perspective of our own concerns. This can not only perform the function of acquainting us with the work being done locally but also could in principle serve as a way to put pressure on the scientific establishment to be more accountable to the tax payer.

The other complaint that one hears from editors is that there are no journalists who can write on science. The people who know science, cannot write and those who can write are typically non science graduates who do not understand the nuances of science and technology. This is probably true. Every year, the enrollment in science courses is falling down while that in commerce and economics is increasing. This of course has to do with the changing job market and the prestige and monetary rewards that go with various professions. But with thousands of science graduates every year, can we not train enough people to write in the media? After all, not every commerce and economics student can write, but the newspapers, through internships train

them to be financial journalists. Why can't a similar scheme, albeit on a smaller scale be implemented for science graduates? It should not be any harder for a science graduate to learn to write science related stories than it is for an average commerce graduate to report on the intricacies of investment banking and derivatives.

Nor can the scientists be completely absolved of blame for this sorry state of affairs. How often have they tried to put forward their views in the popular media? After all, if economists, sociologists and historians can write pieces on issues like caste, economic development and the Babri masjid controversy, why is it that scientists cannot write easy to read, accessible pieces on topics of general interest? Again, one could go back to C.P. Snow and his "two culture" argument, but that is clearly being violated. Increasingly, at least in the West, one is seeing the emergence of what John Brockman calls the "third culture" where scientists and technologists are occupying the central stage in public debates. Stephen Hawking and Richard Dawkins are at least as well known as an historian. But in our country, sadly the number of scientists who have made an effort to reach out to larger audiences is minuscule.

The scientists and technologists have to realize that reaching out to the general populace is not a one way street. If their work becomes well known, it will certainly be beneficial in terms of increased funding, attracting other talent into the field and even for recognition in terms of awards and honours. This may not be so important for workers in pure sciences, but is crucial for people working in the so called "alternative, interdisciplinary" fields like watershed management, waste management or even energy efficient device development.

The case of computer magazines is instructive. There are a fair number of magazines devoted to computers in the country now. And more are coming up everyday. How is it that these magazines can do well, get advertising and readership? One such magazine has got a print run of over 80,000 in only a year! Most of the magazines are providing product reviews and survey articles on specific technologies. Some of it is reprinted from magazines from abroad while a fair amount is locally written. Given that there are far fewer people associated with computers (including the professionals) than with science in the broadest sense, why can't a science magazine do well? It could be argued that the people who buy computer magazines are interested in computers either because of their job or as technology geeks. But purely statistically, there must be enough of such people interested in a science magazine too, given that the base is much larger.

In the print media thus what we need is a conscious effort to report more on S&T, and if possible a magazine which focuses on science. The magazine needs to be of high quality, with articles of interest to a wide audience and written in a language accessible to anyone with a high school knowledge of science. Given that in the next millennia, technology is going to play a central role in our lives, the media owes it to its readers.