

SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION SERVICES

SPEAKING at the Opening Session of the Royal Society Scientific Information Conference, called to examine the possibility of improvement in existing methods of collection, indexing and distribution of scientific literature, Sir Edward Appleton, G.B.E., K.C.B., F.R.S., Secretary of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research said:—

“We would all agree that no scientist gives of his best in isolation. But in spite of everything we manage to do to foster the movement of scientists, and to effect personal contacts between them, we have to admit that they live chiefly on the printed word. After all, it is often by the medium of publication that a scientific worker may be helped—and indeed often inspired—by a fellow worker whom he may never have seen and who lives thousands of miles away.

Science has been well served in the past by the publications of its Learned Societies and Academies and by the scientific journals. But the spate of scientific publications is now such that it is becoming extremely difficult to keep abreast with events on even the most limited sector of the scientific frontier.

This spate of scientific publications may, I think, be illustrated in the following way. If anyone set himself the task of merely reading—let alone trying to understand—all the scientific journals published and worked solidly at his task every day for a year he would discover that at the end of the year he was already more than 10 years behind. If the same constant reader had included the technical literature as well he would find himself about 100 years behind in his work after 12 months effort.

Obviously something must be done to relieve the situation and it is the object of this Conference to find out what that something should be. The really important objectives to be achieved are three-fold. First, to ensure that the scientist gets all he needs; secondly, that he gets it quickly; and thirdly, that he gets it in the right form and shape.

Any solution you recommend must, however, be practicable. It must be reasonable in cost and it must take into account the acute shortage of scientific manpower which is hampering the development of almost every scientific organisation in the world—and certainly every organisation in the British Commonwealth.

It seems to me that you will reach satisfactory solutions of the problems which are before you only if you keep constantly in mind the needs of the scientific user. And you have got to protect him from indigestion as well as to give him the sustenance he needs. You are concerned with this question of the spate of scientific literature. My library contains many a lengthening file of unread journals. The great majority of those journals will *never* be read—and still less understood—by me. Personally what I require, as a working scientist, are reprints or separates of the papers that matter to me. And I want them quickly and in a form easily storable. In choosing the reprints of the papers I require I want the guidance of brief abstracts to inform me of the existence and contents of those papers. These should be short, conveniently classified for the user, and should be available soon after the papers are printed. Scientists working in other fields may well have different needs and it may be necessary for you to engage in some form of operational research to enable you to formulate user needs more precisely. Indeed I gather that something on these lines has already been started.

Then there is the question of translation. Here is certainly a field where co-operation will lead to economy of effort. I well remember that, during the early part of the War, I discovered that a certain German paper, which had an important bearing on radar, had been independently translated by three Government Departments. It was, of course, easy to prevent that kind of thing happening again within the limited field of Government science but we want to see economy of this kind extended to all scientific information services.”

THE HON'BLE PRIME MINISTER, ORISSA, ASKS :—

“CAN NOT THE SCIENTISTS RESCUE THE POOR VILLAGERS FROM THE WRATH OF FIRE?”

INDIA consists of 75,00,000 villages where people, due to poverty, live in huts. Almost all the houses in the rural and a large number even in the urban areas are thatched with straw. In the Province of Orissa except a very few all houses both in urban and rural areas are straw thatched. This year's experience shows that a very large number of houses have been burnt down in the country side of Orissa during the severe summer and in many

places the fire could not be brought under control by the villagers. Loss on this account is enormous both to the people who have been deprived of their lives' savings and to the Government who have rushed relief to the stricken.

It is now high time for our Scientists to solve a problem of national importance by evolving a method for making straw fire-proof.