

Science and industry

At a conference held in Washington last month, sponsored by the Center for Science in the Public Interest, much disquiet was expressed over the growing problem of the interference of powerful industries with the publication in journals of results of scientific research which run counter to what the industry wishes to portray.

The increasing pressure on academic institutions of straitened funds has, during recent years, offered a strong temptation to those institutions to accept money from corporate sponsors, and at the same time to persuade some research projects to suppress findings which the sponsors judge harmful to their commercial interests. The inevitable outcome has been that scientifically determined facts have been distorted and the picture of pro- and contra- arguments has been confused.

Such behaviour can only serve to discredit the integrity of science and research, something much too important to be permitted to be manipulated by businesses for their own ends. A good argument has been made for completely separating academic research from corporate financing, so that corruption may be ruled out. It is accepted that pharmaceutical manufacturers, for instance, have sometimes threatened researchers, interrupted trials, and blocked publication of findings. Results of doubtful significance have been reported in several journals, sometimes even with the shifting of the sequence of researchers' names in attempts to disguise the repetition. It is difficult to see how such tactics can successfully be countered.

In another sphere, it has been reported that industrial pig farms in North Carolina have experienced intimidation of researchers who attempted to discover the health effects of housing pigs in tightly packed quarters without making any provision for the elimination of vast quantities of animal waste. Exposure of workers and nearby residents to organic dusts, ammonia, hydrogen sulphide and noxious odours was severe, and it was found on investigation that research was being carried out into methods of faster and cheaper pig rearing, but not into health and environmental issues. The corporations responsible had recourse to legal advisers who, in turn, made things unpleasant for the university to which the researchers were affiliated. It was noted that scientific societies have done little to help researchers in the face of intimidation by powerful industries.

The industries concerned with tobacco, lead and asbestos have proved to be active in

promoting public doubts about the adverse effect of such products. Although firms concerned have collected data regarding toxicity, the records have often been kept secret. As regards the publication of scientific issues in the lay press, a former science editor of *The New York Times* has remarked that what is called "the growing commercialisation of science" has greatly complicated the difficulty of accurate reporting of issues in the press and revealing the financial interests of people whose views are published.

Fags in the flicks

I have to admit that the sight of someone striding about with a cigarette drooping from the lips, or holding a smoking cigarette in the air, revolts me. It is a stupid but at the same time arrogant gesture.

Tobacco advertising has been held responsible for an increased risk of smoking in adolescents. Now it is argued that the depiction of smoking as attractive behaviour in movies and television programmes may encourage adolescents to adopt the habit when it presents celebrated actors as role models, with all the glamour that it entails.



A study involving adolescents in New England has been published in *The Lancet* for 26 July. A baseline survey identified more than 3,500 children aged 10 to 14 years who had never tried smoking. The researchers then successfully re-contacted just over 2,600 of them 13–26 months later, by which time 259 had started smoking. After controlling for baseline characteristics, the researchers found that those most likely to start smoking were those with a high exposure to smoking in movies. Curiously, the effect of movie smoking was strongest in children of non-smoking parents. More than half the smoking initiation in this group could be attributed to exposure to smoking in movies.

A commentary published in the same journal observes that smoking in films nearly triples the risk that an adolescent

witnessing it will take to tobacco. It is calculated that in the United States some 2,050 children aged 12 to 17 start to smoke every day, and that one third of them will die prematurely as a result. The effect of watching smoking in movies is a dose-related response, so that reducing exposure to such pictures is calculated to reduce acquisition of the habit and its consequences later in life. The movement to control tobacco by restricting access of youths to cigarettes has hitherto had no marked effect on the prevalence of smoking in that age group. By contrast, restricting visual impact of smoking by movie characters promises to help by removal of the glamorous portrayal of a harmful social habit.

Let me finish

Rhetoric is defined as the art of making speeches. In ancient democratic Greece rhetoric was prized as a road to success in public life, although Plato remarked that in fact rhetoric concerned itself with the means of persuading an audience, not with the possible value of the ends pursued. The Stoic philosophers nevertheless accepted rhetoric as a branch of the science of logic and therefore worthy of serious study.

However, rhetoric, like other activities, is highly susceptible to misuse and abuse. When a person is arguing a point of view as a lecturer addressing an audience, it is permissible to continue the line of argument until the speaker has concluded it. When it comes to a public discussion between differing individuals, particularly in the area of broadcasting, things have taken a more sinister turn. We increasingly notice that anyone with political interests and an axe to grind tries to continue talking without a break, in order to prevent the adversary from making a legitimate criticism

during an interval. The expression "you can't get a word in edgeways" was invented to cover this dubious practice. The secret of success, apparently, is to keep talking without taking a breath, so that any legitimate attempt to interject an adverse comment or disclaimer is foiled by the background of noise. The upshot is a Babel of raised voices and lost patience.

It amazes me how some politicians can keep laying down the law according to their conception of it for many minutes without any break whatever in their eloquence. Any attempt to stem the flow is met with a "Let me finish". I find the habit distasteful and my opinion of the speaker is certainly adversely affected, however sound the basic argument put forward. It is surely time we learnt to act as civilised humans and not as grunting swine in a pen.