

# DENNIS FLANAGAN

1919–2005

Dennis Flanagan, the editor of *Scientific American* for 37 years, invented a communications medium—a channel where scientists can present and explain their work both to one another and to a wider public. *American Scientist* broadcasts today on the same channel.

In the 1940s, Flanagan was a writer on the staff of *Life*. Science was part of his beat there, but he covered much else as well, including sports and war news. He wrote the captions for Robert Capa's famous photographs of the D-Day landing on Omaha Beach. *Life's* scheme for telling a story with words and pictures was an art form that Flanagan cultivated throughout his career.

In 1947 Flanagan joined with Gerard Piel, a former colleague at *Life*, and Donald H. Miller, Jr., in a plan to launch a new magazine of science. When they learned that *Scientific American*, a magazine with a distinguished history, was failing financially, they bought and transformed it. In the new enterprise Flanagan became editor, Piel was publisher and Miller general manager.

A crucial innovation came about by accident. Flanagan had assumed they would hire a staff of professional writers, who would go out to visit scientists and then report on what they had learned. But the budget wouldn't support such a staff and, furthermore, writers with the necessary skills were hard to find. So Flanagan began inviting scientists to tell their own stories with the help of an editor and an illustrator. The system worked better than anyone could have guessed, and it became the keystone of *Scientific American's* editorial policy.

The collaboration of scientist and editor was not always smooth-running. When an edited manuscript was sent to the author, it was accompanied by an elegantly crafted Flanagan letter, explaining that "our editorial proposals are intended to make the story more accessible to the general reader." Some authors were grateful for the help; some replied, "I never knew I could write so well"; some howled with outrage that not one sentence had survived intact. The discontented would complain, "If you're going to change

everything anyway, why not just write it yourself?"

But having the scientist's name attached to the article, even if the text was heavily edited, made all the difference. For one thing, it kept the magazine honest. However arduous the negotiations, an article could not be published until the author consented; this was a safeguard against a multitude of errors and distortions. Second, the policy placed the magazine *within* the world of science, whereas the customary journalistic stance is that of an outsider looking in. It's in this respect



Flanagan, seen here in his office at *Scientific American* circa 1980, had strong opinions about the writing of captions to accompany photographs and other illustrations. He argued that they should consist of full sentences, not mere labels. And he imposed a rule that they should exactly fit the space allotted, with last line flush against right margin.

that Flanagan opened up a new channel of communication. Among scientists there have always been a few artful expositors who need no help to explain their work, but now even the less articulate have a way to communicate with the world at large.

Compromise was always the heart of the process. Even as authors griped about heavy-handed editing, readers complained that the articles were too long and too difficult—not edited enough. Flanagan himself, paraphrasing Churchill, often remarked that it

was the worst way to run a science magazine except for every other way that had ever been tried.

Flanagan was a strong personality, with a passionately held opinion on absolutely everything that went into making the magazine, from the placement of commas to the proper plural of *millennium*. For 436 consecutive issues, he read every word of every article, generally three times. There was nothing in *Scientific American* that did not bear his stamp. And yet he also practiced a severe editorial reticence. Nowhere in the archives of *Scientific American* is there one bit of prose signed Dennis Flanagan.

The reason was not shyness about writing under his own name; elsewhere he did so with great charm and verve. His book *Flanagan's Version: A Spectator's Guide to Science on the Eve of the 21st Century* was published in 1988.

Flanagan retired from *Scientific American* in 1984, and the magazine soon thereafter changed ownership and direction. The channel of communication he created, however, remains open. Other publications learned the trick. Furthermore, there was soon a great diaspora of science writers and editors who had learned the art from Flanagan and who carried it elsewhere. I was among them. At one time or another, Flanagan protégés have held editorial positions with *The Sciences*, *Discover*, *Technology Review*, *Science*, *IEEE Spectrum*, *Physics Today*, *Natural History*, *Muse* and *American Scientist*.

His influence on *American Scientist* was quite direct. Flanagan was appointed to Sigma Xi's publications committee in 1988, and he served as its chairman for 14 years. He was instrumental in bringing me to the magazine in 1990. Even some of the elegant locutions of his letters to authors are still echoing in the correspondence of this magazine. *American Scientist* has its own traditions and history, distinct from those of the other magazine with a similar name, but we share the goal of building a conduit between scientists and readers. Flanagan showed us how to do it.

Dennis Flanagan died January 14 at his home in New York.—B.H.