

# OPINION

## SUFFOLK CLOSEUP

### *The New Science*

BY KARL GROSSMAN

Actor Alan Alda, a resident of Water Mill, has embarked on an initiative to help scientists in “communicating science.” This spring, Mr. Alda and Howard Schneider, a founder of the Center for Communicating Science at the new School of Journalism at Stony Brook University, spent a day at Brookhaven National Laboratory working with scientists.

An account of that April event in the North Shore Sun quoted Mr. Alda as telling the BNL scientists, “I think nothing communicates better than an authentic presentation of yourself—not hidden by jargon in some cases, or by nervousness and that kind of thing. If you can really be there and communicate with the person you are talking to, then you get something happening between you and that person.”

Mr. Alda’s effort with scientists is an extension of his hosting the PBS series “Scientific American Frontiers.” For Stony Brook University, having a Center for Communicating Science connects to its longtime main focus of scientific research and, in recent years, comanagement of BNL.

There is nothing wrong with helping scientists in “communicating science,” to instruct them not to speak in jargon and to be personable. There have been great accomplishments in science—notably in medical science—and getting the information out is important.

On the other hand, science has become institutionalized over the last half-century—and, in the name of science, some very bad things have been done and continue to be done, often unchallenged by media.

Many of us are all familiar with President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s warning in his farewell address 49 years ago about the rise of a “military-industrial complex.” What is not widely known is that the original draft of that speech warned not just of a “military-industrial complex” but of a “military-industrial-scientific complex.” Only because of the plea of his science advisor, James Killian, was the word “scientific” eliminated.

And although he allowed the removal of “scientific,” President Eisenhower went on in the speech to offer more comment on the issue. He said, “Today, the solitary inventor, tinkering in his shop, has been overshadowed by task forces of scientists and laboratories” and warned that “in holding scientific research and discovery in respect ... we must also be alert to the equal and opposing danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific technological elite.”

David E. Lillienthal, first chairman of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, used similar words in the 1963 book “Change, Hope, and the Bomb.” He wrote that “the classic picture of the scientist as a creative individual, a man obsessed, working alone through the night, a man in a laboratory pursuing an idea—this has changed. Now, scientists are ranked in platoons. They are the organization men. In many cases, the independent and humble search for new truths about nature has become confused with the bureaucratic impulse to justify expenses and see that next year’s budget is bigger than last’s.”

Mr. Lillienthal spoke about the “elaborate and even luxurious [national] laboratories that have grown up at Oak Ridge, Argonne,

Brookhaven” and the push to use nuclear devices for “blowing out harbors, making explosions underground to produce steam, and so on.” They demonstrated “how far scientists and administrators will go to try to establish a nonmilitary use” for nuclear technology.

In many other areas, science and technology have run amok. Every day we see unfolding in the Gulf of Mexico the truth about the notion that offshore oil drilling a mile below can be done safely.

In my teaching journalism on the college level for 32 years, I’ve instructed my students on the theory on which the American press was based—the libertarian theory that holds that a main function of the press is to be a check on government. A hundred years later, the U.S. press was flexible enough to expand to not only challenging vested political power but also vested economic power—taking on the robber barons and their corporations during the muckraking era.

In our time, the press must take on a new vested power: scientific and technological interests. And it has not been doing that adequately.

Where does Mr. Alda’s work in assisting scientists in “communicating science” stop and public relations and facilitating propaganda begin?



**Karl Grossman**, a resident of Noyac, is a journalism educator, author and award-winning journalist who has written “Suffolk Closeup,” focusing on local and regional issues, for 40 years.

