Why Censorship Now?

Several weeks ago the Government announced that it was initiating a voluntary program designed to prevent unclassified strategic data from being made available to unfriendly foreign nations.

Administration of the project was vested in the newly created Office of Strategic Information (OSI). OSI was set up at the direction of the President on the basis of a recommendation of the National Security Council. Its director, R. Karl Honaman, who is on loan from Bell Telephone Laboratories, is responsible directly to the Secretary of Commerce, Sinclair Weeks. Details of the organization were reported earlier (C&EN, Nov. 22, 1954, pages 4668-9).

Because the general objective of OSI of keeping strategic information away from potential enemies is commendable, we have hesitated to express any concern or adverse comments on the program. We felt that it was desirable to give the agency an opportunity to come up with a specific policy and a detailed program.

These have not been forthcoming. All that has been issued is a broadly worded general statement which, if anything, has tended to strengthen convictions of several editors that the program is one of censorship, regardless of the name it may bear.

The American Society of Newspaper Editors, for example, criticized the absence of clear-cut definitions of strategic information and lack of sharply defined powers for OSI. It added, "Whatever it is called, it is objectionable in a free society which hitherto has not had to look to Government for its approval or advice before distributing facts and information of a nonclassified (nonsecret) nature."

The Society of Business Magazine Editors is likewise concerned at the proposal and has established a committee to investigate the program and make recommendations.

Principal objection to the program is that we know of no practical way that the objectives can be attained by such an agency short of mandatory censorship. Experience with censorship has shown that it is possible to keep information from a given group, such as an enemy or potential enemy. It can only be done effectively, however, by keeping it away from our own people at the same time.

In a 1951 editorial (Jan. 20, 1951) we said: "It will be recalled that in the early days of World War II, a strict censorship program was set up which required editors to submit galley proofs of almost all (unclassified) material proposed for publication. The program was not effective, due largely to the lack of personnel qualified to evaluate the importance and security angles of detailed scientific and technical articles. The system was changed from a mandatory one to a voluntary arrangement which placed responsibility for published material on the editor."

Lest it be implied that the editors are unaware of security needs, let us point out that during World War II and again with the start of the Korean war, reviewers of articles for American Chemical Society industrial journals were furnished a form with each article which requested that they review the article in question from the standpoint of looking out for disclosure of security data. This step was taken on the editor's initiative.

What confuses us with respect to this program is the fact that an agency with identical objectives was set up several years ago. In January 1951 the former Secretary of Commerce, Charles Sawyer, established within his department a service to render the type of voluntary cooperation that is the professed aim of OSI. As in the case of OSI, this was established at the request of the National Security Council. (See C&EN for Jan. 29, 1951, page 363.)

OSI, it appears, has taken over the functions of the former group, which was a part of the Office of Technical Services. The early program had only 10 to 12 inquiries a year following an initial boom of 100 to 150.

A second aspect of the program which is confusing is the area in which it is to work. Information relating to national defense matters is subject to classification by the defense agencies. This extends to work done by private industry under terms of government contracts. This information, therefore, is not of concern to OSI.

OSI says that it is not concerned with censoring recognized industrial, scientific, and technical publications. They indicate that they prefer to leave decisions on releasing unclassified material to the editors and publishers.

The Bureau of Foreign Commerce, also in the Commerce Department, has authority to regulate the export of technical data. It has recently exercised this authority with respect to 53 different types of processes and equipment. Details will appear in C&EN next week.

The area left for OSI would therefore appear to be limited, probably to the "know-how" area. In view of the prior experience of the Office of Technical Services in this area, it seems doubtful that the program would contribute anything of real value to national security.

In short we believe that any government agency which sets itself up to restrict or slow down the flow of unclassified information will do our country more harm than good.

Our great scientific and industrial progress is the real basis for national strength and security. Through this our history such progress has been largely the result of rapid and extensive communication of scientific information and technical know-how. In 1951 we could see no good reason for a program restricting dissemination of unclassified information and opposed it; we can see no good reason for it in 1955. There is no need for an agency like OSI.