

Imagination Versus Facts

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WE are asked not infrequently why *The Electrical Experimenter* lends so much space to the exploitation of the future, or in other words, why we make so much of things which as yet exist but in the imagination.

We admit that such is the case and furthermore we believe that more matter of this kind is printed in our pages than in any other kindred publication. The reason should be obvious. The electrical art and its allied branches are but a comparatively new and unexploited science. An immense number of discoveries and inventions remain to be made, each succeeding day broadening our vision and showing how little we really do know as yet. Every new discovery immediately leads to hundreds of other inventions and each one of them opens up new fields. There seems to be no end or let up; indeed, there cannot be such an end in a world where everything is infinite. We will never reach a period where everything will be known, where nothing is left to be discovered, nothing further to be invented! Progress in science is as infinite as time, it is inconceivable how either would stop.

Some well-meaning people with a shrunken horizon may disagree with us here, and to them we would like to quote the case of one of our government patent officials living in Washington one hundred years ago. This worthy individual left the patent service as he was certain that almost everything of importance had been invented. He felt equally certain that on account of this deplorable state of affairs the Patent Office would shortly be forced to close its doors forever! Since that time almost one million patents have been issued!¹ The telegraph,

¹The idea that “everything that can be invented has been invented” is often misattributed to Charles H. Duell, Commissioner of the US Patent and Trademark Office from 1898-1901. An 1843 report from then Patent Office Commissioner Henry Ellsworth may come closer to the truth: “The advancement of the arts, from year to year, taxes our credulity and seems to presage the arrival of that period when human improvement must end.” For a brief history of this mytheme, see Samuel Sass, “A Patently False Patent Myth,” *The Skeptical Inquirer*, 13, (1989): 310-313, <http://www.myoutbox.net/posass.htm>.

the telephone, the phonograph, the electric light, electric trains, the storage battery, the X-ray, wireless telegraphy, radium and scores of other inventions of the first magnitude have been made. And each succeeding year brings new wonders. We are fully aware of the fact that some of the imaginary articles which we publish are wildly extravagant—now. But are we so sure that they will be extravagant fifty years from now? It is never safe in these days of rapid progress to call any one thing impossible or even improbable. The telephone would have been considered ridiculous fifty years ago, while the aeroplane, prophesied and predicted for generations, was declared a total impossibility by men of science as late as fifteen years ago. Some even published long scientific dissertations proving beyond doubt that such a machine could not possibly be made to remain aloft in the air. Jules Verne who forty-six years ago in his “20,000 Leagues Under the Sea,” imagined the submarine down to its very battery for propelling it under water, was ridiculed and called a dreamer in his day. Nevertheless, the aeroplane as well as the submarine are very much in evidence these days.

Of course, we would publish nothing but facts, nothing but experiments. This would be a very simple as well as easy matter and much less costly. Our self-imposed, infinitely harder task, however, has helped to make this journal what it is to-day: The most widely read and circulated electrical publication on earth. And all this within three short years.

It is no easy matter to think out new things of the future and illustrating them adequately by means of expensive washdrawings or three-color cover illustrations. Indeed, there is nothing more difficult connected with the publication. But if we succeed—and we think we sometimes do—in firing some experimenter’s imagination to work in a new direction, due directly to our imaginary illustrations, then indeed we feel amply repaid for our toil.

A world without imagination is a poor place to live in. No real electrical experimenter, worthy of the name, will ever amount to much if he has no imagination. He must be visionary to a certain extent, he must be able to look into the future and if he wants fame he must anticipate the human wants. It was precisely this quality which made Edison—a master of imagination—famous.

Imagination more than anything else makes the world go round. If we succeed in speeding it up ever so little our mission has been fulfilled. There can be no progress where imagination is lacking.