

A New Kind of Science

Don Hoyt Gorman

Steven Wolfram emerged from over a decade of self-imposed isolation this summer and published his Magnum Opus, *A New Kind of Science*. What's notable, more than the iconic character of Wolfram or the colorful content of the book itself, is the way in which he has affected science communication.

It is as though Wolfram, who's been called "arrogant" and "genius," has decided to apply Milton Friedman-style economics to science's literary marketplace. Instead of going the traditional route of submitting individual papers to peer-reviewed journals, Wolfram launched his work as a direct-to-market project. He claims that his solo act, from exile to vanity press, was to save time; conferring with colleagues would have delayed him. He published the book through his own company, Wolfram Media, Inc., sold out his first print run of 50,000 copies, and hit number one on Amazon.com within a week.

By bypassing the usually staid, measured cadence of scientific review, the book and, by extension, Wolfram himself, were consumed by the mass media and pop culture as celebrity. And Wolfram was ready. He welcomed everyone from Michael S. Malone at *Forbes* to Loch Adamson at *New York Times Magazine*. He sat for interviews and posed for photo shoots. Malone wrote that Wolfram instructed an aide to "get lost" when driving the interviewer to his home, in order to keep its location a secret. It was a move you'd expect from Sean Penn, but something that only increased Wolfram's celebrity.

By employing this non-traditional, market savvy approach, Wolfram has joined the dubious company of researchers who prefer the scrum of press conferences to the impartial scrutiny of scientific journals. Recall Advanced Cell Technology's hyped announcement of a successful human clone earlier this year, or the egg-on-the-face embarrassment of the Cold Fusion researchers, who held a showy press conference a couple years back, to their eternal regret.

The British-born maverick has bought into the frontier ethos of his adopted land, portraying himself as a lone genius whose detractors will only slow his march along the road to truth. This is a man who published his first paper at age 15, earned his PhD. at age 20, won a MacArthur "genius" grant a year later, and made enough money to do what he wanted from then on. Even if it eventually chews them up and spits them out, ours is a culture that embraces quirky, celebrity-prone trailblazers.

His stated wish that his ideas will "pervade not only science and technology but also many areas of general thinking" remains the major litmus test of this whole enterprise. If it works, it may inspire other self-proclaimed twentieth century Newtons to bypass traditional protocol and get their message straight into the hands of those that will feed their egos and their wallets. Even if *A New Kind of Science* ends up collecting dust on the nation's coffee tables, à la *A Brief History of Time*, Wolfram will have already succeeded in shaking up the foundations of scientific tradition in a way that is as unconventional, and as modern, as the text itself. He is set to face his fans and critics alike this month as he heads out on a nationwide lecture tour.