

◆ We All Eat . . . So Food Is News, Thank Goodness!

The public's ever-growing appetite for food news means the media are usually hungry for nutrition and food safety-related information. On the surface this would seem to make part of our mission at the International Food Information Council (IFIC)—to communicate food safety and nutrition science to the media—more straightforward than communicating other issues in the world of science. However, we also recognize that this popular domain brings with it plenty of room for heated controversy—especially when the science is not absolutely clear. We also carry a responsibility to be aware of the potential impact food news can have on an individual's well-being and lifestyle.

IFIC devotes considerable energy to one of the primary requisites for effective communication—understanding the target audience, or in this case, the media. For example, monitoring food-related news is part of our daily activity. We recently commissioned “Food for Thought”, a 3-month content analysis to quantify and qualify coverage of nutrition and food-safety information across 37 media outlets. The analysis found that many stories lacked the science-based details that would deliver context for the reader or viewer. While stories frequently advised on what to eat or avoid, they rarely specified how much, how often, or to whom the advice applied.

This media research also provided 1) an opportunity to specifically examine how the media reported new food-related scientific studies and 2) an overwhelming conclusion that media reports of new scientific studies tend to be oversimplified. For example, one

out of 4 news reports (26%) failed to mention such basic details as the study's design, while only a minority of reports (22%) described the samples on which research conclusions were based. Questions of causal inference and statistical significance were rarely afforded any discussion (4% and 1%, respectively). The research, a valuable tool for IFIC, has shown scientists and science communicators the need to explain and emphasize the significance of certain scientific details when talking with the media about a new study.

Key to understanding the media is recognition that they are not *the* media. They are not a single, homogeneous group; the needs and wants are vastly different among the group. More importantly, the level of science literacy varies enormously among reporters, editors, and producers across all types of media. It ranges from specialized science and medical/health editors who bring a science degree and training to the story, to those who cover health and science on a regular basis but have no formal science background, to general reporters who are covering a science-based story today but covered the local truckers' strike yesterday and will report on a crime story tomorrow. Remembering these differences is vital when developing materials to communicate food safety and nutrition-related science. Scientists also need to keep this in mind when preparing to discuss research with the media.

IFIC recognizes that communicating food safety and nutrition science to the media is often best done by those with the in-depth knowledge of a particular field, the scientific experts. To achieve this end, IFIC works closely with both media and scientific communities to facilitate relationships and foster understanding between the 2 groups. On the one hand, we encourage scientific experts to recognize their public responsibility to be vocal via the media. On the other hand, IFIC works extensively with the media, helping to identify and refer media people to nutrition and food scientists as well as other scientific experts. The media, particularly the daily news media, not only

need to find the right expert who understands their needs, but one who can be available, often at very short notice.

IFIC's work with scientists and scientific organizations goes beyond raising their awareness of the media's needs. It includes helping them to learn how to deliver their expertise and in-depth knowledge in a format that the media can use and the public can comprehend. These “how to communicate science to the media” directions often include advice such as:

- Speak always in short, “plain English” sentences, avoiding jargon or very technical terms.
- Use strong visual analogies and real-life examples wherever possible to make explanations relevant.
- Present the conclusions first, and then provide the explanation (the very opposite of delivering scientific papers or lectures).
- Ask reporters some questions before the interviews begin, such as what event or news is driving their interest in the topic and who else are they interviewing.

Building a very tangible bridge between the world of scientists and that of reporters can take many different forms, such as the workshops, briefings, and roundtables that IFIC hosts on a regular basis. These types of events are conducive to dialogue and discussion, and serve as a most effective tool for communicating the science of nutrition and food safety to the media. Whether a 2-day workshop on Integrated Pest Management or a 1-day roundtable event on dietary fats and fat replacers or a breakfast briefing on functional foods, the experience is usually instructive and educational for both scientists and media.

A stable of science-based publications forms the groundwork of all our science communications to the media and includes a series of in-depth white papers, *IFIC Reviews*, focused on a number of specific food-safety and nutrition topics, as well as the bimonthly newsletter *Food Insight*. The latest *IFIC Review*, “How to Interpret and Understand Scientific Studies”, clearly

The International Food Information Council (IFIC) is a nonprofit organization that serves as an information and educational resource on nutrition and food safety. IFIC provides science-based information to journalists, health professionals, government officials, and other opinion leaders who communicate with the public. IFIC programs receive support from a broad base of food, beverage, and agricultural companies. IFIC materials may be accessed via the Internet at <http://ificinfo.health.org>.

reflects the previously mentioned variance of science literacy among the media covering nutrition and food safety news. Communicating both basic and emerging nutrition and food-safety science to the public via the media remains a challenge, as individuals seek to assume more responsibility for reducing their risk of disease through diet and as scientists continue to announce the results of their studies.

It seems appropriate to end this article

with an on-air excerpt from ABC-TV's *Good Morning America*, from 12 July 1994. Medical editor Timothy Johnson commented on the evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, nature of science communication.

Well, if what the public wants is only studies that are clear and provide absolute black and white answers, we wouldn't be reporting too many. But, I agree, what the public wants is for us to

be honest with each study as it comes along and try to put it into perspective, but keep reminding people that it's the totality of evidence as it unfolds that they have to pay attention to. 🗣️

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