◆ *Science for Public Consumption*

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Washington, DC

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Bruce Lieberman is a science reporter for *The San Diego Union Tribune*. Tony Rimmer is professor of communications at California State University, Fullerton. They approach the public consumption of science from complementary perspectives. Both are concerned with providing the public with timely scientific information. Both discussed the perspective of the researchers' work that is being showcased and the perspective of readers who might have little understanding of complex scientific topics. Trust is the common element at both ends of this spectrum. Researchers and clinicians trust that their work is represented accurately and completely. Readers who rely solely on the mass media for science information trust that it is true and impartial.

Lieberman's approach to a story is to consider first what a reader might want to know. Educated as a writer, not as a scientist, he puts himself in the reader's place relatively easily. When he prepares to offer a story idea to his editors, he is also preparing to write it for the public. At the same time the public is interested in science, it is also ignorant about contemporary developments in scientific investigation. The level of writing has become much more complex than the eigth-grade standard that newspapers have traditionally been credited with using. As topics become more complex, the need increases to describe scientific information in a format and with a vocabulary that the average reader finds accessible.

The criteria for newsworthiness are ease of understanding and quick access to the news of the research. Context is important for understanding the incremental advances of science. The writer needs to explain how a small advance contributes to the larger base of knowledge. As an example, Lieberman mentioned a story about the genetic commonality between the brains of chimpanzees and humans. Building on that connection, researchers have an opportunity to expand the field of human neuroscience.

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Practically speaking, what journal publishers can do to help journalists and other science writers is provide a good news release about 2 weeks ahead of a newsworthy article's embargo date. The release should include a relatively simple explanation of what the study involved, what the results showed, and why the results might be of interest to the public. Lieberman emphasized that the release should provide background information to help the writer understand the topic and all the contact information necessary to explore the topic and conduct interviews with the researchers. Also helpful are the names of others working in the discipline who are not affiliated with the researchers' institution and who could provide additional perspective.

Journalists have a responsibility to explain and to increase the public's understanding. Preparing writers to be able to capture the public's interest and explain complex topics was the emphasis of Rimmer's message. He considers the heterogeneous audience to be somewhat naïve, technologically deterministic, and accepting. Journalists being trained must learn to address those qualities of the audience in their writing, building a foundation of understanding in their work before progressing to the details and importance of the story.

Rimmer believes the interests of scientists, journalists, and the public are far apart. For example, journalists are interested in such story-telling qualities as timeliness, controversy, and novelty, yet in such complex matters as science they may defer to reliable and credible sources. Those behaviors of journalists may not square with the interests of scientists or help to promote public understanding of science. Achieving unity among them is what educators of journalists need to try to accomplish. The journalists' job is to befriend the scientist, engender trust, and open communication. The public is removed from the process of science, but a journalist's careful writing can engage the public's interest, thus connecting researcher to writer to reader.