

Science News: A Medium Rarely Well Done?

Articles on the portrayal of science in the popular media are numerous and varied. A prevailing theme is scientists' continuous complaints about how their work is presented. In an attempt to bridge this gap, the National Association of Science Writers (NASW), the oldest US organization devoted to the dissemination of science information through the mass media, has posted online its publication titled "Communicating Science News: A Guide for Public Information Officers, Scientists and Physicians" (nasw.org/csn/). There is no CSE representative to NASW, but perhaps there should be. Also, it might be interesting to explore whether science journalists and science editors face similar issues in interacting with scientists.

In 1996, *The Lancet* (volume 347) published the following articles under the heading "Medicine and the Media":

Turney J. Public understanding of science (pp 1087-90).

de Semir V. What is newsworthy? (pp 1163-6).

Turow J. Television entertainment and the US health-care debate (pp 1240-3).

Wilkie T. Sources in science: who can we trust? (pp 1308-11).

Altman L. The Ingelfinger rule, embargoes and journal peer review (pp 1459-63).

Radford T. Influence and power of the media (pp 1533-5).

Nelkin D. An uneasy relationship: the tensions between medicine and the media (pp 1600-3).

In 2000, *Science and Engineering Ethics* devoted an issue (October, volume 6) to the media. It contained the following articles:

Garrett JM, Bird SJ. Ethical issues in communicating science.

Valenti JM. Improving the scientist/journalist conversation.

Rensberger B. Why scientists should cooperate with journalists.

Other writings include the following:

Lightman B. Marketing knowledge for the general reader: Victorian popularizers of science. *Endeavour* 2000;24:100-6.

During the second half of the 19th century, the rise of a mass reading public and new printing technologies led to an explosion of popular publications on science. Nonscientists who wrote about science for the general public gave birth to science journalism as they developed new narrative techniques that drew on vivid visual images about the natural world.

Weigold MF. Communicating science—a review of the literature. *Sci Commun* 2001;23(2):164-93.

Science communication is a vital field of mass-communication scholarship. Key players in science communication include news organizations, reporters, science-information professionals, scientists, and audiences. The difficulties of science communication may be a factor in science illiteracy.

Bruno F, Vercellesi L. Science information in the media: an academic approach to improve its intrinsic quality. *Pharmacol Res* 2002;45:51-5.

A postgraduate course was established to train science graduates to be jargon "mediators" (translators) to improve the quality of lay scientific dissemination. The different backgrounds of students and the range of topics were major challenges.

Woloshin S, Schwartz LM. Press releases: translating research into news. *JAMA* 2002;287:2856-8.

For nine prominent medical journals, press officers (POs) were interviewed by telephone, and 127 recent press releases were analyzed. POs trained in communication wrote press releases on articles that they and editors considered newsworthy. Journals were found to have no standards for acknowledging study limitations or for presentation of data. Thus, press releases do not address study limitations or industry funding, and data presentation often exaggerates the importance of findings.