

◆ Keynote Address: Science Coverage at NPR

Speaker:

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Washington, DC

Reporter:

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Tempe, Arizona

Alison Richards, of National Public Radio (NPR), kicked off the conference with an overview of reporting science news, something she says must be packaged in a “compelling, clear, and intriguing way” and “as a source of wonder as well as concern”.

NPR is second only to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in the size of its science broadcasting operation, said Richards. And it is one of the few news media outlets in the United States that is growing, having doubled its audience in the last 10 years.

Richards said that the coverage of science news is “embedded in the main news stream” but that “it can be a fight” to get scientific research into news shows. That feat requires that the science stories appeal to a broad audience, entertain, and also educate listeners.

NPR’s Science Desk is expected to generate around six stories per day: ideally two for each of its three daily news programs. The primary goal is to broadcast science news of national interest. Richards offered some general criteria regarding what NPR considers “science news” and some guidelines for what it seeks in a science story. The big news events, such as the tsunami in Indonesia, which have a science angle, will always be reported on the show. Likewise, the event-related news stories in which science is central—such as the shuttle launch—would certainly be aired by NPR. Press conferences and other mass-media events are considered for the radio broadcasts, as is scientific research news

from journals. Overall, 40% to 60% of stories are from science and medical journals, Richards said.

As to what NPR is seeking, Richards offered the following: science news that is truly news, research or findings that change our understanding of the world or



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change clinical practices, and news that is provocative or has high public interest. In a normal week, Richards said, “there also is a real appetite for science news that provides intellectual refreshment, analysis, and even sometimes humor.”

Besides the checklist of stories that NPR tends to cover, a “crude filter” is in place for those it avoids. In particular, NPR does not cover stories that represent very preliminary or incremental results. Nor does it air science stories that give false hope or “are more of the same”, said Richards.

A “nature is weird category” includes stories about strange mating habits of animals and horrific pathogens. “People love this stuff”, she commented.

NPR also airs science stories in which scientists do “cool things” in their quest to find an answer. The end result is serious, but the way they get there can often be entertaining, said Richards. “We’re always looking for a piece of research that, if told from a different point of view, would tell how something was discovered or give a glimpse of what science is.”

There are practicalities to keep in mind

before contacting NPR about a possible science news story, Richards advised. For one, just as visuals are important to television broadcasts, sounds that come from scientific processes add value to a radio broadcast.

A scientific paper that is published dur-

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—Alison Richards

ing the week of the discipline’s national meeting can pose difficulties because NPR will have a hard time in tracking down both the author and the field’s commentators for interviews. And the NPR editors should receive ample notice about an upcoming science event or paper so that they have time to organize, research, and plan accordingly.

In closing, Richards offered a few tips about press releases. Do not oversell or undersell, she said. In the former case, the consumer feels cheated; in the latter, important points may be missed. It is important to flag the salient points, she said.

Perhaps the best advice given to the audience was that “journalism is about telling stories. And science is full of stories” if you just look for them, Richards said. Quite often, it is how a story is approached, how it is presented that makes it appealing.

So when you’re thinking about whether a paper might be one that the mass media and the public are interested in, “Hold it up to the light like a crystal” and look for the different paths to approaching the story. 📢