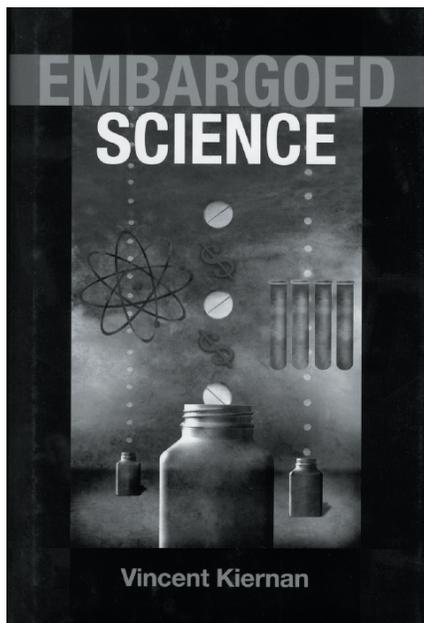


# Reviews

edited by Edith Paul



EMBARGOED SCIENCE. VINCENT KIERNAN. URBANA AND CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS; 2006. 176 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$30.00. ISBN: 0-252-03097-4.

Whether or not one agrees with its conclusions, *Embargoed Science* is worth reading. In addition to discussing journal-article embargoes and arguing for their demise, author Vincent Kiernan offers a well-informed, thoughtful overview of science-news reporting in the United States, especially with regard to interactions of scientific journals and the popular media. He also accessibly relates his topic to concepts from the communication literature.

What are the embargoes of which Kiernan writes? In characteristically lucid style, he explains:

Many major scholarly journals distribute advance information from each issue—perhaps copies of selected articles or even the full issue—to science journalists before their readers or the general public, on condition that the journalists do not disseminate news coverage of the articles until a predetermined time that is common to all the journalists who participate. This arrangement is known as an embargo.

Among the proponents' arguments that Kiernan notes: The use of embargoes gives journalists time to prepare stories that are more complete and accurate than they would be otherwise. It gives various science journalists equal access to information. It increases news coverage that journal articles receive. And, in the case of medical journals, it allows physicians to read articles before patients learn of them via popular media.

Kiernan places the concept of embargoes in historical and other contexts. In tracing the history of embargoes of science news in the United States, he shows that the initial impetus for embargoes and much of the support for their continuation have come from science reporters. He depicts the workings of US science-news coverage and describes how embargoes support the tendency toward pack journalism, in which reporters provide similar coverage rather than competing. Likewise, he relates embargoes to the concept of information subsidies (packaged information that news sources provide to

facilitate coverage they want—and that journalists tend to use rather than seeking information that is more difficult to obtain). Kiernan also explores at length the question of what constitutes accuracy in science reporting. Traditionally, he says, science stories have been deemed accurate if they contained no factual errors and if no important information was missing. He notes, however, that stories also can be evaluated from the standpoint of “communicative accuracy”—in essence, whether the audience derives a correct understanding of what was presented.

In addition to countering some of the claims made by proponents, Kiernan presents his own arguments against embargoes. Among them: Embargoes distort science reporting by promoting attention to the latest findings rather than the broader picture. They also do so by encouraging disproportionate coverage of scientific fields in which journals are embargoed. Embargoes discourage competition that could improve science journalism. And embargoes create “an underground economy of secret advance information about commercially important research”. Kiernan concludes, “The central problem with embargoes—and the reason that the embargo system should be eliminated—is that embargoes are a distraction for journalists and their media organizations, which diverts them from covering what really matters.” His solution: “The embargo system should be replaced with full and open disclosure of research results as soon as they are ready for public consumption, which generally would mean as soon as peer review is complete.”

Kiernan, who has long been a senior writer at the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, has produced an informative, thought-provoking book. Apparently an outgrowth of his doctoral dissertation, *Embargoed Science* shows his strong command of the literature. Especially noteworthy are the effectiveness with which he integrates material from a variety of sources and the readability of the text despite a high density of information. I wish, though, that Kiernan had made it clearer that science journalism often does encompass

more than the reporting of the latest science news. And I would have welcomed as context more exploration of the use of journalistic embargoes in fields other than science.

*Embargoed Science* contains much to interest science editors at journals, in the news media, and elsewhere. It also can help to introduce students to issues in science journalism, and its accessible style suits it for general readers interested in such topics.

I still am not sure whether I agree with

Kiernan. However, I have high regard for *Embargoed Science* and am already using it in teaching. It is a valuable addition to the literature and may engender some valuable debate.

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