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Scientists and the media: Attracting and avoiding attention

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INTRODUCTION

“The public’s right to know and the scientist’s duty to inform are essential in a civilised democracy” – a pompous statement made by Johnstone (2000).

The responsibility of scientists to communicate with the public

The author suspects that, generally speaking, there are two common views among scientists about the media. Most scientists actively dislike the media; some merely mistrust them. Despite that, the author continues to encourage scientists to overcome those views, jump in to the media bath, and talk about their work, their worries, and their hopes. If they fail to do that, others will decide what people should be told about scientific matters. Those other information providers will be far less knowledgeable and will probably manipulate the information they provide to meet their own agendas. These are usually mercantile, managerial, anti-professional or political, and have little regard for the common good. The consequences for the professional scientist and the public are likely to be very harmful.

Scientists who do not ensure that information about their area of expertise is conveyed in an appropriate form to the public, and do not take personal responsibility for that information, are likely to find that opportunities for productive scientific work are severely hampered by either–

- a) Public attitudes such as mistrust, fear, or over-confidence resulting from inadequate information; or
- b) Lack of public, commercial and political confidence in science and scientists as a result of manipulation, selective use and even misrepresentation of the scientists’ position by non-scientific people or agencies.

Scientists are in a very vulnerable position. Marketers, managers and media all want scientists to declare (in a pithy and compelling thirty-five second sound-bite delivered at a sexy location in time for headline treatment on the 6 pm News) that they have discovered/invented an earth-shattering solution to a huge problem and that as a result many lives will be saved and much money will be made by the people watching the television. When, as is usually the case, the scientists are unable to make such a statement, the non-scientists will get as near to it as they can. They will then move on to the next product launch, system re-organisation or news story, while the scientists are left trying to explain that they were mis-reported – but nobody cares.

One option for the scientist is to withdraw and leave all public communication to the non-scientists. The risk is that the public will be fed, or will think it is being fed, propaganda, and therefore will not believe the information.

For reasons of authority, authenticity, the standing and reputation of science, and the common good, scientists must ensure that they do everything they can to ensure the public is properly informed about their area of work.

Journalism and science: professionals, managers and marketers

Over the past 15 years or so, journalism and, I suspect, science, have suffered the consequences of widespread popular and political dogmas and attitudes which are essentially anti-institutional and anti-professional. Profit-making companies have been preferred ahead of public-serving institutions; commercial managers have been preferred ahead of disinterested professionals. The New Zealand experience in this regard has been particularly extreme, and although there are signs of a return to a more civilised balance, the spasm of unbridled mercantilism has certainly left its marks on journalism. For example:

- The number and quality of media professionals has declined. With more international sources available to them, and increasing pressure to cut costs and raise profits, mass media managers have replaced seasoned professionals with younger, cheaper (and often prettier) reporters.
- The number and influence of managers has increased. Decisions about what will be reported, and in what way, are taken not so much for journalistic reasons, but to increase ratings, advertising revenue and profit.
- The main providers and packagers of news are now powerful government and private agencies and companies, who have recruited the experienced professionals mentioned above to prepare and disseminate news, and contrive news opportunities which reflect well on the agencies and companies.

Media ownership, control, and management

In these areas, the period of dominant market forces and commercial ideology has produced consequences such as:

- An increase in the number of outlets for print, radio and television.
- A decrease in the number of media owners here and internationally. It is estimated that 70% of the world’s media outlets are controlled by 17 companies.
- A shift in mass-media control from public to private and from local to central sources. Fifteen years ago, about 85% of our electronic media could be described as ‘public service’ – required to provide programmes on a range of topics, meeting standards of impartiality, balance and integrity and, in the old BBC dictum “to entertain, educate and inform” the people. Today we have only one, seriously under-funded, public radio network with a brief anywhere near that. Fifteen years ago, our electronic media had studios and offices in almost every city. Now, 80% of electronic media are controlled from Auckland.
- Innovative local programming has decreased; derivative programming based on foreign formulas has increased. Cross media promotion and ‘advertorials’ have

escalated. The division between programming with an independent editorial viewpoint and programming with a commercial or propaganda purpose has become blurred.

Effect of these changes on media and journalism

The most obvious effect of the changes is the huge increase in advertising in all media. Newspapers are now thick and bulging with sections, supplements and advertisements; commercial radio is packed with 'jingles' and 'spots'; New Zealand television has the highest ratio of commercial to programme time of any comparable country.

The dangers of excessive advertising were identified forty years ago by Gerald Beadle of the BBC when he said –“Advertising has no medium of its own, so it sticks itself on to other things and all too often defaces them. Every host on which the advertiser settles is damaged or weakened by it to some degree. In countries where television has been set up as an instrument for the sale of goods, its status is deplorably low” (Beadle, 1963).

Here, over the last fifteen years, the 'mass media culture' has become less serious and more tabloid. For example, *Holmes*, which TVNZ describes as its leading current affairs show, very rarely deals with issues, preferring to concentrate on the plight of the victim and the failure of the villain. There is nothing at all wrong with that, as long as the underlying issues are examined elsewhere. Unfortunately that happens only rarely.

This seems to be a common trend. Writing in the *New Statesman*, Cohen (1998) observed “British mass media now place a high premium on excitement, controversy and sentimentality, in which information takes second place to the opinions it arouses”

The scientist who wishes to communicate with the public at large must now be prepared to deal with mass media which are less serious, local, investigative, and issue-oriented than they were, and, generally speaking, more trivial, central, shallow, case-oriented and commercially driven than suits the best interests of the scientist and the public.

Good and bad journalism

The precepts of good journalism were evidenced in the seventies in one of the great journalistic achievements of the half-century, the Watergate affair. After months of hard work by journalists, rigorous checking by editors, and the expenditure of a considerable amount of company money, the *Washington Post* published stories revealing serious improprieties in the governance of the USA. That led eventually to Senate hearings, and the impeachment and resignation of President Nixon.

On a much smaller scale, but still in harsh and disturbing contrast, is an inglorious piece of New Zealand journalism carried out twenty-five years later – the Lyprinol affair. Over a period of ten days in 1999, 'world exclusive' reports featuring a scientist and claiming that Lyprinol might cure cancer were broadcast by TVNZ and published by the *New Zealand Herald*. Almost a million dollars worth of Lyprinol was sold on the next trading day. However, it was obvious to many scientists, health and agriculture officials, politicians, academics and journalists that the stories had

been inadequately researched. People with cancer, or with an interest in its treatment, felt they had been duped and deceived. Later examination of the coverage, by the magazine *North and South*, established that commercial imperatives dominated all others when the 'world exclusive' reports were arranged. In the end, it was obvious that scientists and journalists had failed to act professionally and responsibly, and effectively had conspired to mislead the public on an important scientific matter. Understandably, the episode caused great damage to public confidence in science and the media.

When to attract attention, and when to avoid it

Scientists should attract attention when they know they have something worth saying to the public, or when they know they need to hear what the public hopes for or is worried about. Scientists must prepare carefully what they want to say or show and where and how that will be done. Scientists may need help with that preparation, but must always own what they say, and not allow the helper to put words into the scientists' mouths, nor improperly manipulate, for non-scientific purposes, what the scientist has said.

Scientists should also:

- take every opportunity to inform the public, in good times as well as in bad;
- know and work with reliable media outlets and professionals;
- learn how to express complex ideas and situations in simple language;
- identify which groups of people need which information, and take the trouble to reach them;
- beware of efforts to explain scientific matters through media hype, flossied up press releases, photographic opportunities and stage-managed news events. People have a sure eye for, and certain mistrust of, propaganda;
- be sure of their own position about their responsibility to a company, a professional code, and the public interest.

A leading science reporter for *The Dominion*, Alan Samson (2000), has remarked, “We have to keep on hearing from scientists – after all, they carry in their hands the greatest fears and the greatest hopes of all of us”. I endorse that, and so would love to be able to encourage scientists never to avoid media attention. However, the reality is that scientists, like the rest of us, will occasionally face 'no-win' situations, where it is best to keep the head down until media attention moves elsewhere. With luck, those occasions will be infrequent.

In the end, a civilised democracy is only possible if scientists are ethical, responsible, committed, good and communicative citizens who earn and keep the trust of the public.