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An invitation is extended to all those involved in the field of animal production to apply for membership of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production at our website www.nzsap.org.nz

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BOFFINS AND BROADCASTING

CONTRACT PRESENTATION

CONTRACTOR: D.R. SCOBIE

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Headlines can be Headaches

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INTRODUCTION

With some alarm the author read the headline “Scientists Boring” in *Rural News* in November 1997 (Keating, 1997). Fortunately for the New Zealand Society of Animal Production the page header was “Grassland Conference”. The article, which started “Agricultural scientists are boring the pants off dairy farmers ...”, gradually went further down hill explaining that “The [Ruakura Farmers] conference was ‘old and outdated, inflexible and not meeting their needs. Lectures were long boring and often too theoretical’”. The article’s centrepiece claimed “Farmers agreed it was better to have a good presenter talk about somebody else’s research than to have a poor presentation from a good scientist.”

The contracted papers that follow this introductory paper indicate steps that members could take to remedy this situation. First and foremost, the reader will note that the papers in this contract are written in layman’s language, outside the guidelines for scientific writing.

The media and our Society of Animal Production

Although the first three objectives of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production (from our public website <http://nzsap.rsnz.govt.nz/about/sap12.html>) are all about science, the last three are not. These three objectives are: To provide visions for the future of animal production in New Zealand; To promote the value of science in the development of animal production, and; To take such action as may be necessary to foster improvement in animal production. It is possible that these three objectives could be dropped and we could become the New Zealand Society of Animal Science. Alternatively, we could take some action to foster improvement in animal production, effectively communicate our visions of the future and promote the value science can add to animal production.

Wilson (1977) presented a paper to the New Zealand Society of Animal Production on the popular press. Figure 1 was presented in the proceedings of that conference to

illustrate how the press were “caged” by their own distrust of the system and the distrust of those dwelling in the ivory towers. Most of what we take for granted now is predated by this diagram. For instance, even the format of the NZSAP proceedings has changed three times during that period and is now available electronically.

The author believes that many in the society would be of the opinion that the Politics and Marketing ivory towers (Figure 1) have grown, while the Extension ivory tower has been reduced to dust and the Research tower has been restructured, down-sized and re-housed into an Oamaru stone reception with an ivory-laminated corporate office and a transportable home for the research laboratories. This pillaging of the ivory tower occurred despite the warning: “... that the industry did not appreciate the nature and potential of the press” from Wilson (1977). Take heed of one telling point: Marketers and Politicians know how to handle the media.

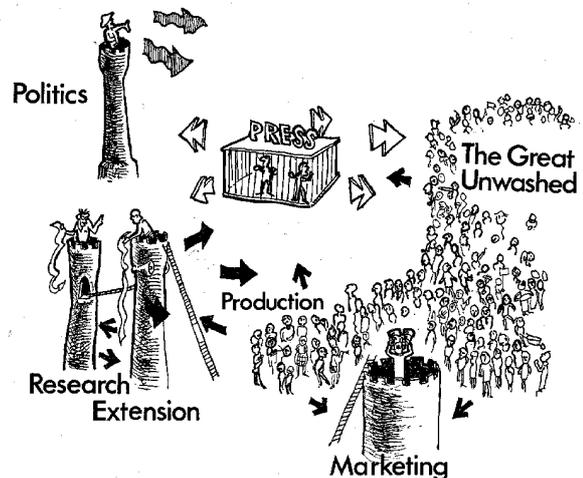


FIGURE 1: Caricature from Wilson (1977) showing the ‘ivory towers’ and ‘the press’ caged by mistrust from the ivory towers.

The author's experience

Between November 1995 and July 1997, the author had six out of six letters to various editors published in the rural print media. In the light of the tag "Boring Scientist" it was obvious that it was time to release a full article. This article hit print in December 1997. It was excessively boring with many language barriers and was relegated to the back of the paper. Lesson One: Listen to the public relations people in your organisation. Undeterred a second attempt was launched in January 1998. This also made it into the back of the paper, at the bottom of the page with an out-of-context photograph to accompany it. Lesson Two: Provide graphics or photographic opportunities. Without doubt the cap of "Boring Scientist" fitted the author.

The author attended a workshop on media skills organised by the Royal Society of New Zealand. The subsequent release about chimaeric sheep hit national and local television, live radio and a photo piece on the prestigious third page of *The Press* in Christchurch. There were some secrets to the 'success' of this article relative to the other two. The science behind the idea was not new (Fehilly *et al.*, 1984), but the prior publicity around "Dolly" the cloned sheep had provided a window of opportunity. A major secret to publicity is timing, and good science takes years, by which time the world may have moved on. The chimaeric sheep themselves were weird-looking and made 'great pictures'. The rules from the media skills course were of enormous benefit. Unfortunately for the Society of Animal Production, one of the rules that journalists use is "Never work with children, animals or boffins"!

In terms of the series of papers in this contract, the first two media releases I made hit well below the mark. The latter one went way over target, and never got an airing in the rural media. Perhaps the most interesting point for other scientists is that the chimaeric sheep remain the most fantastic experimental model (Scobie *et al.*, 1999). This fact was never aired and the audience could not care less. As Wilson (1977) noted, the public press is a means of immediate communication rather than a means of permanent record. Perhaps more colloquially: 'Today's news is tomorrow's fish and chip wrappers'.