

Blame the press?

Most European scientists, when asked about the media, will express the view that journalists and their editors are a despicable bunch. And they are not the only ones. US straw polls from the 1980s found that people considered the ethical standards of journalists to be below those of used-car salesmen or even politicians.

Indeed, seeing the coverage of molecular biology research in Europe, one cannot escape the impression that journalists chase scandals rather than care for accurate and fair reporting. 'Don't let the facts get in your way,' as Michael Crichton described such journalistic standards in his book *'Airframe'*. As the translator and mediator between scientists and the public, the media have largely contributed to the current mistrust of the European electorate for science and technology. But in fact, the press is not to blame. They merely fill a role that is described by the rules of business and society rather than science.

However, the insatiable hunger of journalists and their editors to serve up the next scandal fulfils an important role in democracy, as it ensures that governments and business cannot get away with harmful or illegal policies. In fact, those who framed the US constitution, although they had no reason to particularly like journalists, considered this task to be so important that they granted the media constitutional protection—something no other business has. The first amendment to the US constitution states: 'Congress shall make no law abridging [...] the freedom [...] of the press.' Other democracies, when they drafted their constitutions, simply followed suit.

This worked quite well for a long time. In the USA, the Watergate affair and the Pentagon Papers, as well as the Strauß affair in Germany, are examples where the media rose to the occasion and uncovered scandalous behaviour. But nowadays, it seems that the media is more interested in sex, scandal and soccer (football if you are in the USA), rather

than in fulfilling its role as a sentinel for democracy.

For science, this means a particular challenge, as science is—at least in the eye of the public and the media—generally boring. And when it does become interesting, when it means another step in the direction of a cure for cancer or AIDS, hype and exaggeration are the rule rather than the exception. Furthermore, the media has been all too eager to bring its scandal-mongering into the realms of science, trying to uncover any true or perceived wrongdoing by scientists to get 'a good story'. The public's fears and misconceptions about GM food, DNA vaccination and therapeutic cloning are also the results of scandal-happy, deadline-stressed reporters.

But before we blame the press, we have to realise that the media is just a business like any other. Newspapers, TV and radio stations are owned by multinational news corporations that simply do what any business does—make profit and satisfy shareholders. If this means selling sex, scare stories and scandal to the public—so be it. Furthermore, the media follows business rules, so when costs must be cut to increase the bottom line, reporters and editors are among the first to feel the heat. Often, this means that journalists who have no scientific training or experience, get their stories and information from press releases published by industry, government or interest groups rather than from the scientists themselves. In this context, scientific publishers play an important role when they point out newsworthy findings in press releases. Often, this means that the important work on DNA replication, for instance, is disregarded in favour of the latest research on scrapie or GM crops.

This is not to say that every newspaper and TV station resorts only to sleazy reporting. There are numerous examples of excellent coverage of science and technology. And there are also consumers who are eager to learn about science.

Some news organisations have realised this and have found a receptive and economically rewarding niche where science journalism reaches high standards.

To explain the tense relationship between science and the public, scientists have to take some of the blame themselves. Too often, lack of interest or even arrogance on the side of the scientists has contributed to an atmosphere of mutual distrust. For instance, when Vicki Brower reported the dispute about hormone-treated beef in the last issue of *EMBO reports*, not one of the more than a dozen European scientists she contacted was willing to give her information on this topic. Even worse than unconcern, scientists have occasionally lined up with business or governments to silence or distort the truth before it ultimately came to light.

In the USA, the relationship between science and the media—and ultimately the public—is better than in Europe. US scientists are more eager to communicate with the press and take time to make sure that reporters get all of the information they need. Most US universities and research institutes have press relation officers who contact media organisations, provide reporters with background information and schedule interviews with scientists. Furthermore, various US universities have established programmes to teach students of journalism the particular challenges of science reporting. In Europe, scientists who become journalists still have to learn their trade 'on the job'. However, it is the scientists themselves who bear most of the responsibility. To improve their relationship with the news business, scientists should accept and learn the rules of the game if they are interested in an informed and unbiased coverage of their work and its implications for society.

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