nature neuroscience

Getting the word out

Scientists should have a more active role in encouraging meaningful reporting of science in the popular media. This is all the more crucial given that there are now fewer experienced science reporters and a greater demand for transparency.

In December, CNN announced that it would cut its entire science, technology and environmental news staff. There have also been deep job cuts elsewhere in the news industry, with established newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Wall Street Journal* all announcing plans to cut hundreds of news and editorial staff. As newsrooms shrink, reporting of 'niche' fields such as science becomes even scarcer. Losing experienced reporters with a knowledge of science is clearly detrimental to meaningful science coverage; moreover, with fewer reporters, journalists have less time to do the kind of in-depth research required for high-quality science reporting.

These cuts could not have come at a more critical time. Budget requests for science funding have to compete in a harsh economic climate and many investigators are struggling to renew their publicly funded grants. Now, more than ever, it is essential that scientists communicate with everyone, from schoolchildren to congressional leaders, about how their tax money is being spent and why the work it supports is so vital to society. To do this at a time where there are fewer journalists with scientific expertise and when media outlets are shrinking is no easy feat. It is vital that scientists actively encourage the meaningful and accurate coverage of science in the popular press; our success in doing so may make all the difference to the future of science as a whole.

How then can scientists draw media attention to their findings? Admittedly, not every finding may appear newsworthy at first glance, but how the story is pitched may make all the difference. Journalists are constantly bombarded with news story ideas in the form of press releases that journals (including *Nature Neuroscience*) and many institutions send out. For those papers that we think will be of the greatest interest to the media, we include brief summaries describing the results and their significance for a general audience. A complementary press release, which a scientist may participate in drafting, is often issued by the press office at the author's institution. Journalists have to wade through all this information to select stories and write copy, often under very tight deadlines. A good press release can substantially increase the chances of new results actually getting press coverage.

Good press releases are characterized by the provision of clear and concise information. They sell a story to the extent possible, while avoiding misleading and unsubstantiated overstatements. As with nearly all writing, press releases benefit from active construction and short sentences. Peculiar to the press release (and communicating with the public in general), authors must distil a large body of knowledge and technical vocabulary into a few paragraphs that are comprehensible to a layperson. This includes explaining how new findings fit into the context of previous experiments and other ongoing work in the field, and often focusing on the big picture rather than the details.

At *Nature Neuroscience*, although we include all our published papers in our press release, we prioritize those papers that we think are most likely to attract media attention and write press-ready summaries on them. From our experience, the areas that are most likely to get picked up by the popular press include some link to health, emotion, language, sex and gender, or evolution. However, it's possible that there are papers with an interesting press-worthy slant that escape our attention. If you think that your paper is one for which we should consider releasing a blurb, we encourage you to try your hand at writing one. If, after consultation with your press office or a media savvy colleague, you think it might be something with press appeal, send it to the editor handling your manuscript for his or her consideration. Examples of our press releases can be found on our website (http://www.nature.com/neuro/press_release/index.html) for reference.

Scientists can also influence the content of science news through direct discussions with reporters. Many authors, both from a survey in *Science*[1] and an informal survey of *Nature Neuroscience* authors that we conducted, reported feeling some uncertainty about talking with journalists because of the risk of being misquoted and an inability to predict how their research findings would be portrayed in the press. For those who haven't yet had the opportunity to learn from experience, an article[2] by Celeste Condit provides some helpful tips for improving communication with reporters. These include preparing (even writing out) key points in advance and testing their comprehensibility with laypeople. Condit also suggests that journalistic hype can be tempered by providing honest descriptions of the potential roadblocks and ways in which the findings might be overturned.

As fewer journalists struggle to cover the ever-increasing body of scientific advances, individual scientists can be more involved in encouraging this publicity. We can actively promote the coverage of science news, encourage realistic stories about the experience of bench scientists, or explain clearly and convincingly how basic science advances ultimately lay the groundwork for applications that benefit all of society. Neuroscience is particularly ripe for this kind of exchange because of the public's inherent interest in the way the brain works. We need to give clear explanations of the work that we do, think about what might make it interesting to the public and make an effort to increase communication with journalists and the general public. It's an opportunity that we can't afford to miss. ■

1. Peters, H.P. *et al. Science* **321**, 204–205 (2008).
2. Condit, C.M. *Nat. Rev. Genet.* **8**, 815–820 (2007).