

Meet the press!

Science has always impacted people's lives, and the public has in turn influenced science policies to a certain degree; what is new is that this reciprocity has become more direct. Nowadays, the public decides on major science-related issues, such as funding of stem cell research, by casting their votes. A certain amount of scientific literacy is thus critical for people to make informed decisions. The lay public's main source of information on science is the general media, but it would be wrong to put all the responsibility for correct presentation of scientific findings on journalists—scientists are also responsible for how their work gets presented to the public.

Unfortunately good communication between researcher and reporter cannot always be taken for granted. When the First Amendment Center, an educational organization affiliated with Vanderbilt University, conducted a survey in 2000 among both journalists and scientists to assess the impressions each had of the other, the results did not show a picture of mutual trust and dialogue.

A number of journalists criticized that science professionals often talk in jargon rather than plain language, have trouble summarizing important findings and find it difficult to put new discoveries in a larger context relevant for the public. And many scientists did not trust the ability of journalists to understand complex issues or the tentativeness of certain results. Some even accused reporters of being more interested in spectacular headlines than true context.

Given these difficulties, it may be tempting for researchers to avoid contact with the press altogether for fear of being misunderstood or misquoted. But considering the importance of the media for providing information to an influential public, opting out of this communication does a disservice to everyone. A public ill-educated about the advances and challenges of research may not be interested in voting to determine policies on, for example, science education or funding, or worse yet, may fall for propaganda from ideological or political groups who try to sway public opinion with unsound arguments.

To improve the dialogue between researchers and media, a good starting point for a scientist is to put himself in the shoes of a reporter. Journalists writing for the science section of magazines or newspapers

often have a generic science background, but are by no means experts in every area. Moreover, they often face time constraints and competition for space. As Mark Henderson, a science correspondent at *The Times* in London describes it: "We don't have a designated science section, so I have to compete with crime, politics and others for a good story." This, however, does not mean that reporters are only interested in flashy headlines and ignore the facts. Neither scientists nor journalists like mistakes in their work, and most reporters work hard to avoid them.

Therefore, they rely on the support of scientists to help them translate primary research into news for the public. Many scientific journals and academic institutions assist in the process by publishing press releases on selected articles at the time of publication.

Although not many scientists will be called upon to write their own press releases, they will often be contacted by journalists once a story has been selected. Reporters will ask for an interview either from the corresponding author of a study or from an authority in the field. Not only is it a good idea to accept these interview requests, it is also advisable to prepare for them. Explaining complex scientific ideas in simple yet accurate terms requires preparation and practice and it may surprise some investigators in their first interactions with a journalist how difficult it can be to talk about one's work without jargon or a lot of assumed background knowledge. It also pays to play devil's advocate and think of the worst possible spin or misinterpretation that can be put on the work and come up with creative ways of countering them.

After the interview it is reasonable for the scientists to ask for a copy or transcript of the news piece prior to its publication. This will put scientists' mind at rest that they are not being misquoted and that facts are presented accurately and in a realistic context. Any grave misunderstandings can still be ironed out at this point.

Researchers should not see the media as irrelevant or even hostile to their work, but as a partner in spreading valuable information. Many scientists who were willing to engage with the press have benefited from the relationship and can confirm that a well educated public is a powerful force in advancing science.