

# How can scientists actively engage with the media?

By Jacquelyn Gill on March 14, 2012 • ( 22 Comments )

I've been following a number of scientist-journalist discussions in the last year in various places, including [ScienceOnline2012](#), in the blogosphere, and on Twitter. Increasingly, I've come to suspect that there is often a profound lack of understanding of the respective professional cultures of scientists and journalists, which has important relevance to the ways in which this discussion has played out. For example, during the ScienceOnline2012 panel on [Why Scientists Hate and Fear the Media](#), many scientists were shocked to learn that not all journalists read the paper they're covering, and it seemed to come as a surprise to some science writers that there are institutional barriers to scientists interacting with the media. In spite of these many conversations, I think there are still some serious holes in each group's knowledge of how the other's field works. So, when someone urged scientists to "engage with the media" (and not just "put stuff out there"\*) during yesterday's [discussion](#) on scientists and the media at the Royal Institution (which I followed via Twitter at [#riscimedia](#)), I noticed that a few of us scientists were wondering, "How?"

What does it actually *mean* for scientists to engage actively with the media? For most scientists, I think the scientist-media model looks something like: 1) Publish ground-breaking paper in top journal. 2) Wait for university press office to write press release and maybe contact you. 3) Wait for phone calls and e-mails asking for interviews. 4) Answer questions. 5) Sit and wait for articles to be published while experiencing a mixture of nervous excitement and dread.



Interactions between scientists and journalists need not be characterized by mutual frustration (or boredom). (Thanks to undergraduates Chad Zirbel and Grace Schellinger of the Williams Lab, portraying the Scientist and Journalist). Photo by Jacquelyn Gill.

Is that engagement? Not really– I'd argue that that's a pretty passive process. Engagement, real engagement, would be more fulfilling and would ultimately better serve both scientists and journalists– which means it better serves the public, too.

The following are some ideas about engagement for scientists that have come directly out of my media training and interactions with scientists and journalists online and at ScienceOnline2012:

### **1) Cultivate relationships with journalists you trust.**

Not all science writers are created equal. The next time you read a particularly good (or bad) piece, make a note of the byline. Keep a running list of people whose coverage you like, and those you'd rather not talk to (and yes, it is okay to say no to a particular journalist if you're uncomfortable with their coverage). Join Twitter– I can't emphasize this enough– and start following science writers. Participate in the online conversations, in blogs, article comments, and in social media. The changing face of science communication is being deliberated right now, and we scientists should be a part of that discussion. Develop a reputation as a scientist who is interested in communication and is an effective communicator. Get to know your university media team and who your local science reporters are. Attend workshops on outreach and communication, and network with other science communicators.

### **2) Understand the culture of journalism.**

It's really important for scientists to understand the constraints that media operate under. Many journalists can be fired for showing scientists copy (as opposed to scientists, who are used to their work being read and vetted by a number of people prior to publication). Journalists have very quick turnaround times (maybe hours or days) compared with those scientists routinely work with (one year in review? Really!?). Journalists– or, the good ones, anyway– often have a much better sense of what message will be of interest and the best way to communicate that in an accessible way, and it is worth listening to them in this regard. Journalists may see scientists as biased or having a particular agenda that may differ from their own– while I don't believe that journalists are immune to bias or agenda, and think that we ultimately share more in common than is often portrayed when it comes to desired outcomes of science reporting, I do think that the more we can familiarize ourselves with one another's perspectives, the better communication will ultimately be.



The scientist-journalist interaction can be mutually engaging, fun, and informative! Photo by Jacquelyn Gill.

### **3) Don't be afraid to approach *them*.**

Many of the scientists I talk to on a regular basis don't think their work is of interest to the media (or the public)— maybe because they work with un-charismatic organisms, in non-exotic research systems, or on some highly theoretical or obscure aspect of their science. Others assume that if their work isn't published in the Big Three (Science, Nature, PNAS) that it's not of interest to journalists. While it's true that the press packages and embargo websites associated with top journal articles make high-profile pieces easier to cover, that doesn't mean that your work is less interesting or important if it's published elsewhere. One recurring theme I've heard as I've followed the scientist-media conversation is that journalists want to get away from “churnalism”— the endless cycle of recycling press releases for the Paper of the Week, so that all coverage starts to look the same after a while. Long-form, context-driven pieces are increasingly popular, which opens the possibilities for new kinds of science reporting. Try inviting a journalist into your lab or the field, let them know about talks you'll be giving or interesting work you're doing, even if it's still in-progress. Pitch an idea for a piece to a magazine editor, or write it yourself! Journalists don't always know who to talk to, or have the context for a particular idea's development through time. By acting as liaisons for science, we can give them that.

### **4) Make the journalist's job easier.**

Make your papers available— if your piece is behind a paywall, that makes covering your work all the more difficult, especially if you don't have a Big Three press package. Write a press release of your own and put it on your website or blog. Seek out media training in workshops and classes— make communication a priority in your professional development. Journalists want to find scientists who know how to communicate effectively. Before an interview, prepare your message in advance, including sound bites and metaphors (*I cannot overemphasize the importance of metaphor in effective communication*). Shyness or fear can be perceived as



Blog posts can be excellent ways for journalists to engage with you in conversation, or to see the broader context behind your work. Blogs can help establish us as an approachable expert actively engaging in communication, which makes us and our work that much easier for science writers to find. Posting field notes from your latest expedition or even an exploration of your research ideas may inspire someone to contact you to do a piece on your work. Even the info-dump posts help educate science writers and the public on our jargon, methods, and the broader scope of the problems we work on.

### **Some final thoughts for journalists:**

I do think it's important for journalists to realize that there are cultural and institutional barriers to scientists talking with the media. Many of us are actively discouraged from engaging in media outreach by our department chairs or our advisors (though this isn't the case with me, this is a very real phenomenon). Many scientists get no media training as part of their professional development (though this is improving), and have absolutely no experience or sense of how to communicate their work to a lay audience. Studies that could be potentially controversial either in the public or within science can trigger hate mail. Also, many of us who do engage have had bad experiences— and by bad, I don't simply mean that we're annoyed by simplification: I mean egregious errors in fact or extrapolations (a la “this will cure cancer!”) that can have serious impacts on how our work is understood by the public, and how our colleagues view us. Scientists who do media well can be looked down on as media darlings, putting message and fame above doing good science. There is some truth to that, in that we can't all do everything well: science communication is only one of many things scientists must do daily— including science, writing, teaching, grant-writing, administration, training, and mentoring (not to mention having a life). Scientists face very real time constraints, and there have to be multiple models of what it means to do communication well that accommodate different levels of engagement.

Do I mean that these are good reasons for scientists *not* to engage with the media? Of course not— but if journalists want us to engage, it's important for them to also cultivate scientists' trust as well, which means understanding our constraints, concerns, and limitations.

Ultimately, I feel that the time I've spent with journalists and doing outreach has been very rewarding. I'm frustrated and saddened by what can often feel like a lack of progress in the scientist-versus-media debates, but feel that ultimately this conversation is helping science communication to improve overall. I'm weary of over-simplistic “scientists are arrogant!” and “journalists are shady” rhetoric, and genuinely feel that the best way forward is for each of us to start understanding and validating one another's professional cultures, and to identify places where our practices could be more accommodating to one another. I would even venture to suggest that scientists are in a good position to facilitate this, given that we are more readily able to straddle the lines between the practice of science and science communication (says the blogging scientist). I urge my fellow scientists to actively engage with writers, and to try writing themselves; there are many strong arguments to do this, which I didn't get into in this post, but ultimately we stand to benefit from being more engaged. As scientists, our time and energy are limited; let's strive to make our interactions strong, productive, and meaningful.

I've found these books to be particularly helpful:



Also, check out a very relevant series of posts by Matt Shipman (@ShipLives) for Nature's Soapbox Science:

- 1) [What Scientists, Science Writers, and PIOs Should Expect from One Another](#)
- 2) [Writing About Science, When You're Not a Scientist](#)
- 3) [Taking Science to the People](#)

Many thanks to [@scicurious](#) and [@\\_ColinS\\_](#) for helpful conversation in 140 characters or less!

\*It turns out that this message was an oversimplification of a statement by Ed Yong (@edyong209), who urged scientists to engage with journalists rather than posting angry tweets or blog entries criticizing coverage. The tweet version triggered a discussion of how scientists should be reaching out to the media and cultivating relationships with those they trust, which turned into the focus of this post.