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NOTES&THEORIES
DISPATCHES FROM THE SCIENCE DESK

Nine ways scientists demonstrate they don't understand journalism

If reporters wrote stories the way some scientists seem to want, few people would read science coverage

The purpose of a headline is not to tell the story but to pique the interest of readers without lying. Photograph: Sang Tan/AP

Have you heard of Futurity? How about The Conversation? In different ways, these sites and others are bypassing the traditional media model – cutting out the journalist middleman and letting researchers speak more directly to the public. In the case of Futurity, which is backed by a growing number of research-intensive universities, university press officers act as mediators with the site posting more-or-less edited "stories" (press releases) that are uncontaminated by any sordid contact with the grubby mitts of the reporting classes.

The Conversation, based in Melbourne, is a more interesting hybrid with hacks drafted in to commission and edit contributions from academics.

There's nothing wrong with these sites. As a critical friend of science, I regard anything that improves informed public debate about research to be a good thing. But if you browse them a little while you can't help but notice that they're, well, a little bit dull.

If you're a scientist or just a science nerd, this should surprise you. Because judging

from many people's reactions to my post on copy-checking this is exactly the sort of "journalism" that you would like to see.

So why doesn't it work?

Below are some common criticisms and requests that science journalists receive from researchers. I'm not arguing that science journalism cannot be improved, but responding to these criticisms by changing what we do would do nothing to improve the coverage of science. Here's why.

The standard structure of news stories doesn't work for science

There's been some shrewd criticism of the "inverted pyramid" model of writing news but there's a reason we stick to it doggedly. It works. Some readers come to news sites wanting a quick hit. Others want to know more about each story. The 'inverted pyramid' – essentially presenting the new results at the top then filling in the background – can satisfy both camps if it is done well. Those who suggest otherwise should look at their blogposts and work out how far down the page most of their readers get. They may be surprised.

The internet doesn't have word limits. Why do you?

"On the web, real estate is endless and cheap" so why on earth do the press keep producing 300-700 word news stories and paring down scientists' quotes to a sentence or just a few choice words? There are two main reasons. The first is respect for the readership. Editors want readers to return to their site and read their content. We don't want to bore them. Every sentence in a story, every word, is weighed and if it is found wanting, it is cut. The second reason is resources. A news story needs to be commissioned, written, edited and subbed. This takes time. If you double the length of every news story you publish, you effectively halve the number of stories you can cover – or worse, you halve the amount of time spent getting the story right in the first place.

Your headline is hyperbolic

The purpose of a headline is not to tell the story. That's the purpose of the story. The purpose of the headline is to pique the interest of readers without lying. So the next time a multi-squillion pound experiment reports evidence of neutrinos going faster than the speed of light, don't expect the headlines to say "Astonishing but esoteric particle physics finding likely to be flawed though no one can see how yet".

Change my colourful quote at once!

No. Quotes serve many functions in a news story but one important reason they're there is to inject some humanity into the piece. Most scientists are human and,

thankfully, don't speak in the arid tone that characterises an academic paper. They get excited and say things like "If we do not have causality, we are buggered" and "I don't like to sound hyperbolic, but I think the word 'seismic' is likely to apply to this paper". That's nothing to be ashamed of. It is no secret that reporters go fishing for a good quote. That's nothing to be ashamed of either.

Why did you emphasise the 'tabloid' implications of my work?

There's a fundamental misapprehension among many in the scientific community that the principal job of science journalists is to communicate the results of their work to the general public. It's not. A journalist might emphasise one part of the research and ignore other parts altogether in an effort to contextualise the story for their readers. That does not, of course, justify spinning the story out of all recognition so that it fundamentally misrepresents the work.

The story didn't contain this or that 'essential' caveat

Was the caveat really essential to someone's understanding of the story? Are you sure? In my experience, it's rare that it is. Research papers contain all the caveats that are essential for a complete understanding of the science. They are also seldom read. Even by scientists.

You can't cover my work. I forbid it

A scientist presents their work at a conference or deposits it in a pre-print archive but then insists that reporters should not cover it. The edict is often issued as a result of fears that coverage of the work would jeopardise subsequent publication: some journals (including Nature) have a strict embargo policy that forbids reporting of a piece of research before a specified time. Embargoes do pose a problem for journalists interested in producing timely coverage of science – even though on closer inspection the fears often prove to be unfounded.

But it's worth stating that while no one can force a scientist to talk to a reporter about their work, no one can force a journalist not to report something that is in the public domain – even if they are reporting your work and you have refused to speak to them.

How could you quote that person who disagrees with me? He's wrong!

I hate the straw-manning engendered by the "he says, she says" mode of journalism. But the findings of science are often hotly contested and often wrong. In many cases, journalists uncover flaws in the research while calling independent sources to pull their story together. At Nature, a significant number of news stories are dropped after

enquiries because they turn out to be weaker than the abstract or the press release suggested. For the stories that get through, the journalistic process may expose more problems or disagreements that were not caught when the paper was peer-reviewed. If the criticisms seem valid and are not easily rebutted, then journalists have a duty to represent them.

The story contained an error or errors

It is worth remembering that while a paper represents months or years of work to the scientist concerned, the reporter or editor responsible is likely to have dealt with a dozen or more similar gems in the same week. One scientist's heinous press bungle looks like a difference of opinion to another. Nonetheless, if there's a genuine factual error in a news story it should be corrected and a note posted with it to acknowledge the error. Journalism is fast-paced and even with the best fact-checking practices, there's room for errors to creep in. Everyone makes mistakes from time to time …

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> If reporters wrote stories the way some scientists seem to want, few people would read science coverage.

But that must not be a license to write outright lies, or present fringe ideas as absolute truths. Certain interpretations of quantum mechanics, black holes and string theory come to