

Attracting the Media

N. Henbest

The media provide the essential conduit for the mass communication of science. Yet the drivers for a successful media "story" are not necessarily the same as the factors regarded as most important by the astronomy researcher.

Taking television as the prime example of a medium of mass communication, I examine some of the elements that are involved in the creation of a successful and influential astronomy programme.

The first challenge to the programme-maker is to persuade the broadcasters to screen an astronomy documentary, rather than – say – the latest soap or reality show.

With an interesting and topical astronomical result in hand, the next challenge is to create a show that's as absorbing as it is informative. The key element is a script that both enthral and guides the viewer: simplicity must sometimes win out over comprehensiveness.

Locations and interviewees must be carefully researched. Sadly, the astronomers who would be selected by their peers are sometimes not the best interviewees when it comes to engaging the viewers.

Last – and of course not least – are the visuals. While astronomy has powerful images from Hubble and other telescopes, the most exciting topics in the Cosmos are often impossible to film in the detail viewers expect – examples include extrasolar planets, black holes, alien life and the Big Bang. Here TV graphics are increasingly the key. But to what extent can these depictions be justified scientifically?