

COMMUNICATING ASTRONOMY

A Reporter's View

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ABSTRACT

Reporters and editors are the intermediaries between scientists and the general public. So if you want to reach your audience through the print media, you'd better have a good understanding of how the newspaper and magazine world works. Here I present a reporter's view of the communication between astronomers and the press: what do the news media expect from scientists, how do you maximize your chances of media exposure, and what are the pitfalls and golden rules of communicating with journalists.

HOW DO THE NEWS MEDIA WORK?

It's all about money

News media are commercial organizations. They need to make money. If something doesn't sell, they won't run it. In the end, this means that they won't run a story, if they don't think their readers are interested in it. Of course, the readership interest is very much dependent on the type of publication—the New York Times may run stories that would never make it into USA Today.

Types of publications

Whether a story runs in a particular news media outlet (and in which form) or not depends heavily on the type of publication. Daily newspapers may run brief, newsy items; weekly magazines (or weekly newspaper sections) are more likely to run longer stories with some background; monthlies may even decide to run a feature story if there isn't a particular news peg.

No obligation to be complete

Since news media are not scientific publications, they have no reason or obligation whatsoever to be complete in their coverage of a particular field of science. The upshot is that the most 'sexy' topics will prevail; some technical topics within astronomy will always have a hard time to make it in a newspaper or magazine, no matter how important they may be to the scientists involved.

Always in a hurry

Remember how grant applications are always submitted just minutes before the

deadline? It's the same in journalism: everything happens at the last possible moment, so in general, there's very little time for detailed discussions with interviewees, and—unfortunately—for fact checking. There's little hope that this situation will ever improve: it's the nature of journalism.

Ignorant about science

In general, editors of newspapers and general interest magazines are pretty ignorant about science. Expect them to have the same biased attitude as the population at large. In some senses this is good, since they aim to reach the public, which is also scientifically illiterate. On the other hand, lack of insight can often lead to strange decisions, for instance, in the choice of topics to cover.

News!

They're called news media, after all. In general, if there's no news, there's no story. But news can be many things: a scientific observation, a rocket launch, a publication, a talk at a conference, a new book, an exhibit, a visiting scientist and so on. At all costs make sure that the title and the lead of a submitted story or a press release has a news component.

An exciting story

Black holes are exciting. Extraterrestrials are exciting. The Big Bang is exciting. But many more astronomy-related topics can be exciting to a general reader. If it isn't for the research itself (which may be too abstract), the excitement can be generated by the scientists involved, or the new instrument they used. Any story that fires the imagination of the reader stands a better chance of ending up in a newspaper.

Human touch

You wouldn't expect to see it in *The Astronomical Journal*, but talk about people is an important aspect of journalism. Readers want to have some mental image of the protagonist of a story: how old is she, what does she look like, how did she end up in this job? A teaspoonful (or more) of the human touch may make a story on a challenging topic easier to digest for the outside reader.

Conflict

People like conflicts, especially if they're not involved themselves. Also, conflict is what science is all about. Two groups with different views on a particular topic (like the formation scenario of giant planets) may not feel much personal animosity toward each other, but there's nevertheless a conflict that will make a story on the topic a more interesting read for a general audience.

WHAT DO NEWS MEDIA WANT?

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR EX- POSURE

Pictures

If you want to enhance the survivability of your story, make sure you include pretty art in the form of photographs, artist's impressions, and explanatory diagrams. Also, make sure that editors will actually see the prettiest picture(s) during their first casual glance over your submission. Remember: they're in a hurry, and may not have time to read all of it at first, but a nice picture will catch their attention.

Know your press contacts

I'm not suggesting you send Valentine cards to newspaper editors or science writers. But if you know each other just a little bit (by making the occasional phone call, or having a chat at a conference), it will be easier for you to stand out from the crowd (dozens of press releases arrive at the desks of editors each day after all). Also, you will be recognized if you plan to make follow-up calls after sending a press release.

Be concise

It's an old saying: you never get a second chance for a first impression. News editors may make a first selection on the basis of reading just titles and first sentences. A brief lead paragraph should contain the whole story in a nutshell. If you can't explain the importance of the story in a few sentences, the topic may be too difficult or too arcane for a general readership.

Be patient

Your first submission may be ignored. Your second submission may be ignored. Your third submission may be ignored. Don't give up; be patient. Many, many factors are at play—it probably has nothing to do with the quality of your stories. Also, if a publication decides to run your story, they may bother you with numerous dumb questions. Again: be patient.

Be cooperative

Editors or reporters may have many requests after they decide to write on the topic of your press release: contact information for scientists, pictures, fact checking, et cetera. Don't expect your job to be finished after the release has been mailed. Being cooperative will be valued and remembered; next time around, your submission will ring a positive bell.

Be available

It happens all too often: media contacts and scientists mentioned at the bottom of a press release are unavailable (sometimes they're even on holiday). Make sure that your spokespeople understand that they should be at their (cell) phones almost all

day for the first two days or so after the release has been issued. Also, in case of a great story, they should not expect to do much 'real' work in these first few days...

You're not a writer

Although large institutes have professional writers to produce press releases, smaller organizations rely on their scientists to do the public relations. They should realize that a newspaper article is not the same as a scientific paper or a poster. Leave the actual writing to the writers. You may not agree with their choice of topics, their phrasing and their use of metaphors, but it's their job, not yours.

They're not scientists

In communicating with news media (or even with science journalists), remember that they may not have an academic science background. Try to avoid the use of jargon (mass function, apo-centre), unfamiliar units (parsec, erg), general science concepts unknown to most people (3-sigma, power spectrum) and the like. You are the one who has to take the first steps on the bridge between science and the public.

K.I.S.S.

Keep It Simple, Stupid. Don't complicate things with too many unnecessary details and qualifications. Spend some time thinking about good metaphors and analogies to illustrate what you want to convey. Also, since the topic of your story is usually pretty unfamiliar to your readers, keep your language simple. This will make the story easier to digest.

It's all about the reader

In the end, the goal of your efforts is to bring science to the general public. Don't forget that members of the general public are all around you (you're part of it yourself!). How would you explain the topic of your story to your aunt or your greengrocer? Why not ask them for advice? After all, you would also like them to be able to read it, right?

Reporters are nice people

They may have a slightly different agenda from scientists, but in general, editors, reporters and writers are nice people. Don't be too suspicious of them, especially since you need them. After all, you are partners in getting the message to the audience. If in doubt, make solid agreements about matters like embargos, quote checking and so forth beforehand.

PITFALLS AND GOLDEN RULES