

Reporters Are Not Public Relations Agents*

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Inquiries into the relationship of scientists and science writers are nothing new, though they may have become more frequent and more formal in recent years. Scientific societies have begun making overtures to the press—a more esthetically acceptable generic term than *media*, especially to working reporters—asking writers to get together with scientists for the ostensible purpose of talking over areas of mutual professional concern. In fact, I believe many of these get-togethers are motivated by the fact that scientists have decided they need to improve their public image if they are going to get the kind of public support they want and, in order to change their image, they need the press.

The Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology and the National Institutes of Health have sponsored two retreats for scientists and the press. Let me read to you the opening remarks of a summary of the second of those meetings,** a summary agreed to by each of the participants.

The scientist, in his public life as a scientist, is now engaged in two different arenas of communication. In the first, the most familiar, he strives to communicate his thoughts and researches to his peers, his fellow scientists, and if the truth be told, mainly to his fellow specialists. Early in his graduate student years, by the example of his teachers and mentors and by examples in the scientific literature, the scientist learns the accepted paradigms of form and style for the good scientific paper. The scientific literary minuet he learns to dance can be, and usually is, quite stately. Only scientific literary mavericks dare to use an innovative style, and their struggles with editors of scientific journals are infrequently crowned with success. In a word, communications between scientists, *qua* scientists, are stereotyped and characterized by a rigid style and an esoteric jargon. . . .

***Improving information exchange between scientists and representatives of the communications media: conference II, held in Hershey, Pennsylvania, in the spring of 1972. Full report published in Federation Proceedings, vol. 32, No. 4, April 1973.*

**From the AFCR Symposium, "The Physician-Scientist and the News Media." Presented at the National Meeting in Atlantic City, May 4, 1954.*

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But there is another arena in which the scientist, like it or not, is increasingly engaged and is still groping his way. . . .the communication to the lay world of the activities of scientists. . . . Exterior communications have become necessary, indeed imperative, as the scientific community has grown in numbers, the extent of scientific operations has increased, and the import of the consequences of scientific activity has become highly visible to the general public. Couple this public awareness with the necessity for public funding and the imperative for exterior communications is not only clear but pressing.

The scientist comes to the science writer because he needs money. But he must not delude himself into thinking that it is the science writer's job to get it for him. It is all too easy to confuse the respective roles of the scientific community and the press. In many cases, it is essential that scientist and reporter cooperate in order to come up with a story that satisfies both the scientist's sense for accuracy and the reporter's sense for news. But cooperation is not cooption. The reporter is not the scientist's public relations agent.

The principal function of the press is to convey information; in the case of the science press, it is to let the public know about developments in science and science policy. Most frequently, the information the press conveys is based on a relatively new event. In shorthand, it is news. The press is alerting the public.

Historically, news in science and medicine has been treated about the same as in any other field. A *big* story is one about something that either affects, or at least interests, the maximum number of people. News in science and medicine can be a fairly big story without being intrinsically scientific. When the Food and Drug Administration recalls batches of canned mushrooms, it is important news for householders, probably a lot of them, and most segments of the press will give the story some attention. It can be quite a big story for daily papers. Attacks on training grants by the Office of Management and Budget are important news for medical school deans and professors, and for young scientists. But it is big news in a much smaller community than mushroom-buyers. A

threat to training grants is a big story for *Science* but it is unreasonable that many daily papers will stop the presses over it. Secretary Caspar Weinberger's proposal to collect hospitalization insurance from as many patients as possible in the Clinical Center of the National Institutes of Health is also news, but to a far smaller community than that affected by the demise of training grants, and so, it is a smaller story.

Each of these stories is, in a sense, a science story, just as is the report of a major scientific discovery. Unfortunately, the latter does not come along as often as those with a public health or political twist. Scientists wish there were more discoveries to report. Certainly, science writers do; and at times their mutual desire for something earthshaking raises problems we will get to in a moment. But the truth is that most of what is printed or broadcast as science news is usually just one step in a progression of events and, by itself, is not suffused with the excitement or portent usually thought necessary to merit space on page one. Nevertheless, the science writer chronicles these steps with the belief that it serves some segment of the public interest. Thus, in many ways, the science writer at his best fulfills his role by chronicling events, putting the various pieces of research together to provide the clearest possible understanding of what has happened in the laboratory and, when it will help, supplying an historical perspective. But the reporter should not create the event.

In science, the role of the reporter has never properly been one of advocacy. This same idea used to apply to most of journalism before advocacy journalism became popular first in the reporting of political events and then in the chronicling of a wide range of happenings generally described as matters of civil liberties. But advocacy has been far less evident in science writing. This is not to say that a science journalist should not have a point of view, or that it should not be reflected in what he writes. But outright advocacy in anything less than an editorial is something else. There is no valid reason for the scientific community to expect that a science writer will take on and champion even the most worthy of its scientific causes. Not if the science writer is a reporter. The person to promote science is the scientist. And the amount of support he gets from the press presumably has to do with the virtue of his case.

If the scientist is merely promoting an idea that is self-serving, not many people will listen to him. Once, perhaps, but not repeatedly. The story about the Administration's move to kill training grants is an example. The first "event" in what became a long and sometimes tiresome sequence of events occurred when it became known that training grants were to be killed through financial starvation—there would be no money for them in the President's budget. The second event was the scientific community's reaction. It was one of dismay and outrage, expressed forcefully, dramatically, time after time after time. It was said that lights were going out in laboratories all over America and that the very health of the American people was at stake. Bright young men and women were pictured rejecting the biological sciences and the future of science was said to be very grim. But for all the stories of shock and horror, there were precious few explanations of why training grants should be continued. Scientists presumably had strong reasons for not wanting training grants to go down the drain, among them the fact that they played an important role in supporting departments and institutions as well as students. But without a better, more convincing argument, their reasons appeared to be no more noble than the force behind any pork-barrel project: group self-aggrandizement. Consistently, the scientific community explained that science is good and that biomedical research is important, but seldom did it address the question of why the taxpayers should so fully support postgraduate training in biology, when it does not do so in other sciences or in other intellectual and cultural fields including music and dance and art. Nor did it openly bring its intellectual powers to bear on the question of why training grants and not some other mechanism? Although pressure from the scientific community was sufficient to force the Administration to restore a partial training program and although it aroused some interest in Congress, scientists have yet to demonstrate to this reporter or, I believe, to the public at large just why we should reinstate the old training grant program.

Perhaps the scientific community, in seeking public support, should address itself to a greater and more noble cause, the one it focused on in 1968 when research budgets began to decline. Perhaps it should argue for a consistent base of public support for basic biomedical research.

Certainly, there is a distinct and valid place for basic biomedical research in the plethora of activities supported by public money and I suspect that most scientists would like to know with confidence that research will always be supported at least at some minimal level. I know that one of the complaints about funding that I hear most frequently is that it is so uncertain, that it fluctuates between highs and lows that preclude planning and leave laboratories in fiscal limbo. Perhaps the scientist should strive to create an environment in which he can be sure of stable public support. To create that environment, to justify the support he is seeking, perhaps the scientist should speak to the public about that which he knows best: science. His pleas for more money, and again more money, are, on the face of it, neither convincing nor interesting. But by speaking honestly and without undue exaggeration about the substance of his work, he may be able to convince the public of the value of what he is doing.

If we accept what surely appears to be an economic fact of life—one that is not likely to fade away—that science budgets are not going to grow and grow as they have during the last two decades, we have to conclude that the scientific community is going to have to make some hard choices about how it spends the public's money. There may be some merit in making an effort to explain to the public just how and why those choices are made. It is obvious that the public will no longer accept the idea that scientists make the right decisions simply because they are scientists. But the reasons behind decisions can be explained and, in the right context, can even be good reading.

The process of explaining science in the future is going to require better cooperation from the scientific community—not just more, *better*. It will also require a greater effort from members of the press but a major share of the responsibility rests with scientists themselves. Some scientists are more articulate than others. Likewise, some science writers are more articulate than others. When the two get together, the results are usually eminently satisfactory. Unfortunately, there are members of both groups who are, frankly, inept. When the inept scientist and the inept reporter get together—well, it is just bad luck, but not an irrevocable set-back for either science or science reporting and one hopes that scientists, witnessing poor

journalism, will not be so turned off that they turn their backs on the press altogether. One also hopes that scientists will not be turned off by members of the press who lack the sophistication of the relatively small number of full-time science reporters in this country.

During this past year I worked with WNET, public television in New York on a series called *The Killers*, special shows dealing with various diseases. I was amazed to learn that at times—by no means all, but sometimes—our producers had great difficulty getting to the investigators they wanted to see. Often, the problem seemed to be that the scientist was put off by the producers' inability to readily ask cogent questions or immediately grasp the full dimensions of his work. If scientists are serious about their claims that they want to reach the public, they will have to make a greater effort to get the job done.

In all this, it is important for the scientist, with his passion for nuance and detail, to recognize that the results of his cooperation with the press may not always be precisely what he wants. Reporters are fallible. Reporters have to simplify. And, as I said, reporters are not public relations agents and will not necessarily put only the best face on everything the scientist says and does.

Still, scientists and reporters will continue to deal with one another, if for no other reason than that scientists want public money and reporters want stories. Irvine Page knows this—and said it:

I wonder if physicians . . . are fully aware of how important science writers and the press have become to medicine. Twenty years ago we disparaged them, but with the granting of federal funds and the deep involvement of the Government in medicine and research, a large and frightening change has occurred: now we want all the publicity we can get. But more importantly we must take the public and the Government into our confidence to show them the true nature of the difficult problems we face. . . . I see nothing but good coming from giving the public a better understanding of science and medicine. Even changes in the law may depend upon an informed public. We should not be an arrogant, inarticulate new priesthood.

Your need for public support may be a crass-sounding basis for our relationship. But the only other basis for human relationships is love, so I suppose we are better off helping you explain why you want money.