

Science journalists – like Woody Allen?

Mark Sergeant on problems and pitfalls of science reporting

Adam Rutherford, *Nature* podcast editor and TV presenter, recently tweeted that science journalists are the ‘Woody Allens’ of the media world as they are prone to ‘constant self-flagellation, anxiety and repressed sexuality’ (@AdamRutherford). These comments were made following a debate on 13 March at the Royal Institution, which considered the different requirements of scientists and journalists for disseminating science to the general public.

A number of important issues relating to science journalism were discussed at this event, such as the need for journalists to check and verify information with the scientists whose research they’re reporting, a need for journalists not to rely exclusively on press releases when reporting scientific stories, the pressures on journalists to complete too many stories in a limited timeframe and the need for more specialist subeditors in the

press who understand the intricacies of science. The debate was led by Alok Jha (science correspondent for the *Guardian*), Dr Chris Chambers (a psychologist based at Cardiff University), Dr Ananyo Bhattacharya (chief online editor at *Nature*) and Dr Alice Bell (a science writer affiliated with UCL).

You can directly access the presentations from this event at tinyurl.com/c4vxb5b and the resulting discussions at tinyurl.com/cwcdpwc.

Although the discussion as a whole was fascinating, as I’m someone who worked briefly in the field of science journalism through a British Science Association Media Fellowship, I was particularly interested in one topic of discussion: whether science journalists should consult original research papers when writing their articles.

Most science reporting is based on writing up a synopsis of a single academic article or conference paper. In a lot of cases, the first contact journalists have with a story is a short press release prepared by either a university press office (for researchers at their specific institution), specialist organisations like the British Psychological Society (which can prepare releases for research reported in BPS journals or at BPS conferences and events) or more general media organisations such as the Associated Press (www.ap.org). These press releases are extremely useful; they usually cover all of the key information on the study, they are prepared in a format accessible to

journalists, and they also provide useful quotations from the authors which can be transplanted into an article. Given the diverse range of topics that a science journalist can report on, these releases are also very useful for guiding the reading through highly esoteric fields of scientific inquiry. For example, in my time as a science journalist I wrote about topics as diverse as swine flu, epigenetics, the benefits of selenium supplements and the mapping of the aphid genome.

For a lot of science stories both the goal of a study and its key findings are fairly straightforward to interpret. As a result some science journalists, particularly those familiar with the area the paper is embedded in, may not feel the need to follow up the author or original paper for further information. However, there are a number of cases in which science journalists do feel the need to contact the author or read the original paper. For example, some stories may be controversial, have unexpected findings

or have important implications for politics and social policies. This is particularly the case for public-health-related research.

There may also be issues with the actual press releases that are prepared for scientific articles. Although these press releases are easy to digest for science journalists, they are potentially open to hype, from individuals and organisations keen

to attract media attention to a particular piece of work. Such press releases also do not often contain full details of the article, particularly in relation to its methodology and findings, which may mean that flaws in the research or unexpected findings are overlooked.

It would therefore seem sensible for science journalists to read through original research articles as a matter of course. As an academic, this is certainly the approach I would follow in my profession. However, this is where the constraints of the media come into play. In an ideal world, science journalists would have ample opportunity to read the original paper and then contact the lead researcher for additional comments and questions. This information could then be compiled into a balanced and insightful article. However, all of this takes time to



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MEDIA PRIME CUTS

Lobsters and the psychology of disgust
<http://t.co/rwsl5Mh1>

A psychological approach to zoo management
<http://t.co/ywdcr2Hj>

Crowd expert @drjohndrury on panic buying
<http://t.co/bdcW0ajo>

The cost of creativity, from @jonahlehrer
<http://t.co/MVFIXzCk>

Excellent piece on Sherif and Robbers’ Cave by @genelewisperry
<http://t.co/xWQT03uJ>

Visual illusions that change how you think
<http://t.co/MBI6ry9J>

Reflecting on five decades of split brain research
<http://t.co/ThsAEDuK>

NHS reforms: the psychologist’s view
<http://t.co/NeWOfLuM>

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accomplish, and journalists, of all persuasions, are under constant pressure to get information ready for distribution as soon as possible. Also, journalists rarely work exclusively on a single story at any one time, and may not have the opportunity to follow one particular article up in as much depth as they would like. Finally, journalists may have problems gaining immediate access to either the original research papers or the scientists who conducted the research, all of which could potentially introduce further delays.

James Randerson from the *Guardian* featured an informal poll that he'd run on 24 UK-based science journalists about whether or not they read original articles (tinyurl.com/cwsajlg). I saw two key themes emerge from this information. Firstly, the majority of science journalists indicated that they would mostly or always read the original paper, particularly if it concerned a health-related story. A number of these reporters stated they would carefully read through the abstract, introduction and discussion/conclusions and maybe skim through the methodology and findings. However, if there was a potential issue with the methodology or findings, such as a small sample size or some anomalous findings, then these sections would be studied in more detail.

The second major theme to emerge concerned time constraints; journalists were perhaps less likely to read through a full article when they were on a tight deadline. Although several journalists indicated they would ideally like to make their own assessment of the research, rather than relying on press releases, this wasn't always possible given the deadlines they had to work to. A number of the journalists also reported that it would be useful to talk directly with the scientists who conducted the research. However, this is not always possible as the researcher may have other commitments or indeed may be unwilling to engage with the press.

To conclude, I would make two suggestions for the future. Firstly, science journalists should have automatic access to original research articles so they have the opportunity to check and confirm vital details of scientific stories. Secondly the onus is very much on scientists, including psychologists, to make sure their work is accessible to members of the press and that they do their utmost to engage with the press in a mutually productive fashion. The BPS media training courses offer an excellent introduction to this field (see tinyurl.com/c77n28v).

France's autism 'shame'

The media love an autism story. Barely a week seems to pass without a *Guardian* feature or Channel 4 documentary about life with a (usually high-functioning) child with autism. We're not immune from this ourselves (see 'Viewpoints', April issue), and the emphasis perhaps in part reflects psychology's preoccupation with autism as a research topic. I suspect that many conditions affecting a greater percentage of the population receive far less funding, journal articles, conference presentations and column inches. Autism has a mystique.

The latest splash concerned treatment for autism in France. Our cross-channel neighbours have designated autism as this year's 'Grande cause nationale', raising its media and political profile (see www.autismegrandecause2012.fr), and World Autism Day in April saw a piece on the BBC Magazine website (see tinyurl.com/cnsv8r9) discussing France's autism treatment 'shame'.

This was sparked by the view that 'to this day, in its approach to autism, the French medical establishment continues to believe in the powers of psychiatry and psychoanalysis – long after the rest of the world has switched to alternative methods of treatment'. A campaign by 'independent associations' is gathering pace, despite recommendations in a March report from the High Health Authority promoting the use of educational and behavioural approaches and referring to psychoanalysis as 'irrelevant' for cases of autism (tinyurl.com/bth5lx7). Families believe the health authority has not gone far enough in denouncing the methods involved. Psychoanalysis is classified as a practice not agreed upon by all, whereas protesters say that it should be reclassified as 'not recommended'.

'Today everyone knows that autism is a neuro-developmental problem. It is not a psychosis or mental disorder,' said Muhamed Sajidi, president of the association Conquer Autism. 'But in France it is the psychiatrists – heavily influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis – who remain in charge. And they have shut themselves off from all the changes in our knowledge of autism.' 'The whole idea was that it was *la faute à maman* (the mother's fault)', says Candy Lepenuizic, a British mother of a child with autism, married to a Frenchman. 'It was the "refrigerator mum", or there was some problem with the family dynamic.'

Sajidi claims that 'many families are

sending their children to Belgium, where it is much easier to set up behaviourist treatment centres... Today only 20% of autistic children in France are in school, and often only part-time.'

Campaigners have even accused the psychiatric profession of resisting calls for change, because the fewer patients there are, the less they earn. Sajidi, who set up the association after his life was 'destroyed' by the medical establishment's failure to diagnose his son Sami's autism, says: 'They have a financial interest in institutionalising autistic children.' Child psychiatrists like Lauriane Brunessaux believe that the associations have grossly distorted the debate, and are engaged in a battle to 'discredit psychoanalysis and the whole notion of the unconscious'. Hugh Schofield, the author of the BBC website article, writes of the psychoanalysts' anger that 'while on their side of the debate they are quite prepared to admit the effectiveness of behaviourism – as one of several possible approaches to autism – the behaviourists are dogmatically tied to their system and theirs alone'.

There at least seems to be light amongst the heat, as the 'health ministry is finally beginning to fund pilot schemes for behaviourist schools, as well as early diagnosis centres'. JS

MEDIA LISTEN AGAIN

An exceptionally disturbing programme on BBC Radio 4's File on 4, on 'family annihilation', left me with a heavy heart and a dollop of scepticism.

'In the last two months,' the programme said, 'three fathers have killed their partners, children and themselves. File on 4 investigates what drives these men to take such drastic action.'

The programme claimed that 'family annihilators' are 'overwhelmingly men'. But such 'annihilations' are not recorded in crime statistics. I'm also sure I've heard psychologists in previous media coverage say that just as many mothers kill their children, just in different ways, possibly for different reasons, and with less resultant media attention.

Have a listen and let us know what you think: <http://t.co/D2JtLEV>. JS