

# Scientists and the media

## Guidelines for scientists working with the media and comments on a Press Code of Practice

The media play a vital role in communicating an understanding of science to a wide audience. Both scientists and journalists can benefit from a constructive relationship, based on a mutual respect for each other's respective roles. Journalists can assist researchers in gaining public recognition for their work, while scientists can help journalists to inform, educate and entertain the public.

This document consists of two parts:

- guidelines for scientists working with the print and broadcast media; and
- comments on a Press Code of Practice, which were submitted by the Royal Society as supplementary evidence to the inquiry into 'Science and Society' by the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee.

We hope that this will help scientists and the media to work together effectively.

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document 1/00

March 2000

Registered Charity No 207043

## Guidelines for scientists working with the media

- 1 Perspective** When journalists contact you, think carefully about who they represent and how this will affect the way in which they treat your work. For instance, a daily broadsheet newspaper will have a different perspective from a popular tabloid. A journalist from a glossy magazine may have the time to visit your workplace, but might expect you to spend half a day with a photographer. A zoo radio show may not give your ideas the same respect, or airing, as Radio Four's 'Today' programme.
- 2 Deadlines** Respect the very real deadlines to which journalists have to work. Try to respond promptly to media enquiries - if they say they need information in a couple of hours, they usually mean it. If you offer to find the necessary information for journalists, be sure that you can meet their deadlines.
- 3 Competition** News stories about science have to compete against the other stories that appear each day. A science correspondent or general news reporter must make a case to the news editor, who will make the final decision about whether a science story should receive coverage after the story has been written and filed, alongside dozens of others, by the deadline. To give your story the best chance of appearing, think about angles, photographs, graphics, colour and background that can help the reporter to win over the editor.
- 4 Content** Science stories often have to appeal to an intelligent audience or readership that may have little knowledge of science. Explain your work in simple, everyday language and avoid using jargon - imagine you are trying to explain it to a friend over a drink, for example. If you have to use a technical term, explain what it means. Think imaginatively about the possible implications and applications of your work. When describing the results of your research, highlight what is novel or unexpected about the findings. Highlight other notable features of your project that might add personal interest or a sense of the bizarre, for example. Point out what impact your work might have on the audience or readership, and be prepared to talk about the wider implications, such as ethics or funding issues.
- 5 Approach** Many print and broadcast media have specialist staff who are very good at reporting science stories. In some cases, you may be contacted by other staff who do not have a background in science. However, even reporters who have a PhD in a science subject are unlikely to know much about your specific area, so you should assume that they are not acquainted with your field of work. Rather than giving them some references to consult in a library, it is much more helpful to offer a quick explanation. Think of a couple of sentences that provide a lucid and succinct overview of your work. Do not be patronising.
- 6 Responsibility** Scientists have a duty to act responsibly when dealing with the media. Avoid the temptation to exaggerate the significance of your work. Refer to similar work by your peers to put your research in context. Although a reporter may want a straightforward yes or no answer, don't be pressurised into making a response that you will later regret. If you do not know the answer to a particular question, say so. Never lie.
- 7 Attribution** Try to avoid saying "No comment". If a journalists sense that you are trying to hide some facts, they have a responsibility to find these out from another source. Be very careful about talking 'off the record'. If you have established a degree of trust with a particular journalist, he or she may use you as a sounding board for news events, or for an 'off the record' opinion about somebody else's work. But remember that even if such information is unattributed, it is often obvious who supplied it. The simple rule is: if you don't want it to be reported, don't mention it.
- 8 Authenticity** Scientists also have a responsibility to help journalists to establish the authenticity of a story. Let a journalist know if your work has been subject to peer review, for instance by submission to a journal, or some other quality control mechanism.
- 9 Credibility** Be honest about your competence and credibility when it comes to commenting on a particular issue. Although you may have opinions about a range of topics, you should make clear to a journalist what your direct area of expertise is, and whether your comments lie outside it. Also remember, however, that journalists work to tight deadlines, so you could still offer invaluable help even if your expertise is not exactly what is required, perhaps by suggesting the names of other scientists who work in a relevant field.
- 10 Quotes** In most cases, there will not be enough time for you to check a news or feature story before it is broadcast or printed. Most journalists will, however, respect a request to check quotes before they are used, but make sure that this is agreed from the outset. Remember that journalists working to a daily deadline will only have a narrow window - sometimes a few minutes - to check quotes, so try to make sure that you are easy to contact. Don't be surprised if the outcome of a half-hour interview is often just one or two short quotes.

**11 Interviews** If you are asked for an interview, advance preparation will improve your performance. Try to find out what angle the journalist will adopt and what sorts of questions you will be asked. For the broadcast media, find out if the interview will be taped or live and whether you will be participating in a panel discussion or just providing a short soundbite for the news.

**12 Collaboration** If you are collaborating with other researchers, you should try to agree beforehand what to say if journalists contact you. But remember that unlike technical journals, there is no onus on journalists to mention every researcher and institution that is involved in a project. Be reasonable about requests to give appropriate credit - remember the constraints on the availability of column inches or air time.

**13 Contacts** Think laterally when dealing with the media. If a print journalist contacts you for a comment about a 'breaking' story, you could offer to write an opinion piece if time and space allow. If he or she agrees, be sure at the outset to agree on the terms and conditions, including copyright and fees. If journalists do approach you, make a note of their full contact details - you never know when you may have a story that you can take to them.

**14 Corrections** If, when a story appears, you have been misquoted or there is a serious factual error, you should write to the journalist, setting out your concerns. For the printed media, you can also write to clarify matters and ask for it to be printed on a letters page, but make your contribution brief, punchy and entertaining. If you are unable to achieve a satisfactory resolution, then write to the editor to whom the journalist reports. Such action is usually sufficient to obtain corrections. If, however, you are still not satisfied with the outcome, you should contact the relevant media 'watchdog', such as the Press Complaints Commission or the Broadcasting Standards Commission.

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1 Salisbury Square  
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EC4Y 8JB

Broadcasting Standards Commission  
7 The Sanctuary  
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SW1P 3JS

## Comments on a Press Code of Practice

This note was submitted by the Royal Society in November 1999 as supplementary evidence to the inquiry into 'Science and Society' by the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee.

The Royal Society would like to reiterate its acknowledgement that the media play a crucial role in communicating an understanding of science to the public. In its original submission to the inquiry into 'Science and Society', however, we endorsed a recommendation by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee that a Code of Practice should be introduced to ensure that media coverage of science is factually accurate. We accept that the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) could provide appropriate safeguards either through amendments to the current Code of Practice or through the provision of guidance notes to all editors.

At first sight, Clause 1 of the Code of Practice operated by the PCC appears to cover adequately the accurate reporting of scientific matters in the printed media. Recent experience suggests, however, that the Code, in its present form, does not completely prevent inaccurate, misleading or distorted scientific material from appearing in the printed media. Although only 20 complaints received by the PCC in the last 12 months have been about scientific stories, we believe that this figure underestimates the number of instances of inaccurate reporting, particularly outside the science sections of newspapers.

Although the Royal Society will encourage the scientific community to be more active in drawing to the attention of the Press instances of inaccurate reporting, it is in the public's best interest that inaccurate material does not appear in print in the first place. As the current PCC Code does not always ensure that this happens, we offer the following suggestions for improving matters. We recognise the high standard of reporting practised by science journalists in their coverage of science stories, and our comments arise primarily from concerns about the activities of their colleagues.

1 **Accuracy** Clause 1(i) states that "newspapers and periodicals must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted material". Clear guidance should be given on what needs to be done to ensure accuracy. Editors must be able to demonstrate that the necessary steps have been taken.

2 **Credibility** Journalists must make every effort to establish the credibility of scientists and their work. They should note that a scientist's professional

credibility may be restricted to the area of science in which he or she has specialised. Eloquence is no substitute for expertise in the provision of scientific opinion. This means that journalists must be sufficiently informed about the science behind a story if they are to establish the credibility of an interviewee. To assist the media in this respect, the Royal Society is publishing a directory that provides a list of 'media-friendly' scientists and their areas of expertise.

- 3 **Balance** Newspapers may suppose that they have produced 'balanced' reports by quoting opposing views from scientists about a particular issue. While the intention may be to present both sides of an argument, a majority view on that matter may be held within the scientific community, and the opposing view is held by only a quixotic minority of individuals. Although the majority view may occasionally prove to be incorrect at a later date, such instances are exceptions rather than the rule. While we appreciate that it may be difficult for journalists to take a poll of scientific views, it is in the public interest that journalists identify, whenever possible, a majority view.
- 4 **Uncertainty** There are many emerging areas of science that are subject to uncertainty. Although it is sometimes difficult to convey the scale of this uncertainty, journalists should resist the temptation to quote the most sensational of alternative interpretations as though it were fact. The scientific community must convey a sense of alternative interpretations in an accurate and meaningful way. Scientists and journalists should engage in a dialogue about how such uncertainties in science should be presented. Furthermore, journalists should be wary of regarding uncertainty about a scientific issue as an indication that all views, no matter how unorthodox, have the same legitimacy. As the President of the Royal Society noted in his 1998 Anniversary Address: "The fact that, at a particular time, science cannot provide an answer to a problem does not mean that anything is possible. There are limits provided by existing knowledge."
- 5 **Legitimacy** Some of the means to help journalists assess the legitimacy of scientific claims are already in place. A cornerstone of the quality assurance process in science is that new theories and experimental results have been exposed to peer review. Although this process is not infallible, it is a good indicator of whether or not a piece of research has been conducted

properly and the conclusions drawn are justified. Journalists should be encouraged to treat with healthy scepticism work that has not been approved through peer review, including information that can be accessed through the internet.

- 6 **Advice** The key point is that journalists must have access to authoritative advice about the credibility and legitimacy of the science that they wish to report. Most national newspapers have specialist science journalists. The science staff should be consulted about science stories covered by colleagues who are not scientists.
- 7 **Responsibility** Although it is important for scientists to communicate via the media with the public about their work, the scientific community must act responsibly when dealing with journalists. Some scientists do seek publicity for work that furthers their careers, and may make exaggerated claims about the significance of scientific 'breakthroughs'. It is not in the public interest for the media to be used in this way. We believe that the scientific community should work with the media to develop mechanisms through which journalists can quickly establish the authenticity of a scientific story. These could involve scientific advisors who can offer well-informed guidance within the timescales demanded by modern journalistic practice.

The preceding suggestions for normal practice have been drafted with the printed media in mind, but we believe that coverage of scientific stories by the broadcast and other media, such as the internet, would also benefit from their use. We have confined ourselves to suggestions that should ensure inaccurate material is not reported by the media, but we would like to stress that they will only prove successful if they are properly enforced.

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ISBN 0 85403 535 4