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Science Communication in the Mass Media

By: Joan Lurie

The use of the mass media to present scientific news to the general public was the subject of a symposium entitled "New Initiatives in Science Communications" at a meeting of the American Physical Society in New York City on March 24, 1980. The four panelists included a daily newspaper science writer, the science editor of a weekly news magazine, a physics professor who serves as a consultant for a series of television science programs for children and a physicist who has produced science "spots" for television network news.



John N. Wilford of the *New York Times* talked about the goals and degree of success of "Science Times", a weekly section of the *New York Times* which concentrates on scientific news. The content is determined primarily by the nature of a daily paper; wherever possible the science stories are "news-pegged" i.e. closely tied to breaking stories. The coverage includes biology and medicine, hard science and technology related stories. Biology and medicine, including behavioural sciences, are easier subjects than physics to present to a lay audience. However, according to Mr. Wilford, "If you're not willing to make the effort to get physics stories from physicist to lay audience you shouldn't be in the science reporting business."

The reception of the "Science Times" has been generally positive. Increased circulation of the *New York Times* at schools and colleges is at least partly attributable to this section. Both content and quality of "Science Times" will be improved as more advertisers are attracted to this section.

Leon Jaroff of *Time* magazine told the audience that the science journalist in the United States today must be a salesman — he or she has to compete for the

attention of editors and audiences with other news that is perceived as more popular. That this salesmanship can result in extremely popular and successful coverage of scientific subjects was amply demonstrated in Mr. Jaroff's amusing, anecdotal talk. He stressed that responsible reporting with substantial scientific content can reach large numbers of people and gave several examples of very successful *Time* cover stories on scientific subjects.

These included a 1977 story on Leakey's anthropology research and another entitled "The Bugs are Coming" describing research on the use of sex pheromones in the destruction of insects. A more recent success (and a scoop for *Time*) was this March's story on interferon research.

Time-Life is considering the publication of DISCOVER, a monthly science magazine for the intelligent layman — convincing evidence that the publishing industry believes there is an audience for scientific news stories. This publication would be, in Mr. Jaroff's words, "fairly newsy" with content consisting primarily of stories which occurred in the preceding month. The presentation would be "fairly splashy but responsible". Since reporters for this type of magazine don't have to contend with daily newspaper deadlines, stories could be verified with the researchers.

Both print journalists agreed that science news in the media should include a balance of fast-breaking stories and more reflective pieces. Ideally the wire services should provide more science coverage so that smaller papers without science staff could pick up the stories.

G.F. Wheeler, in a talk entitled "A Physicist in TV Land", described the content and production of "3-2-1 Contact", a science program for eight to twelve year olds produced by Children's Television Workshop. The show has an audience of about two million at home and another two million who watch it at school.

The content of this show is "pre-science" and not science. The speaker described the level of programming as comparable to "pre-English", the preparation for formal training in grammar that children acquire by listening to conversations or watching programs like Sesame Street. The studio portion of the show is narrated by three teenagers with varied ethnic backgrounds in order to provide role models for a wide variety of children. Other portions of the show are shot at locations of

interest to children. For example, a tape was shown of a roller coaster design "laboratory" including discussion of roller coaster scale models and forces involved.

The program will run for 13 weeks with each week's 1/2 hour telecasts centered on a theme. The week on "Forces" included episodes on buoyancy, gravity and muscles as well as an introductory program entitled "Forces Change Motion."

One of the most interesting aspects of this talk was the speaker's description of the problems involved in reconciling the world views of the studio people and the science advisors. Typically about five hours worth of footage was shot for every few minutes of the final program with much discussion between writers and scientists as to what was valid scientific and television content.

Since 64 percent of the respondents to a Roper poll named television as their major source of news coverage, television news is, according to David Kalson, the final symposium [sic; "symposioun" should be "symposium"] speaker, the true mass medium of the late 20th century. In order to reach this large audience (presumably including many people otherwise uninterested in science) the American Institute of Physics produced fifteen 90-second science "spots" for broadcast on regular network news programs. These were funded with the help of a \$141,000 grant from the National Science Foundation and were produced under the direction of Audrey Likely. Dr. Kalson coordinated the production and wrote the scripts.

Science Is Part of Everyday Life

The objective of this kind of programming is to enhance public understanding of science; not to teach science but to heighten audience *awareness that science and scientific news is a part of everyday life*. Three series of five programs each will be produced on Physics and Medicine, Energy in the '80s and Astronomy. Fast-breaking science stories cannot, of course, be covered in this manner and the speaker expects to be "scooped" at least some of the time.

One of the difficulties in achieving effective distribution of this material is the strong resistance of news directors to showing material produced by outside sources. This resistance persists even though the programs are being distributed free of charge. Dr. Kalson stated that even the prestigious, non-profit American

Institute of Physics, with its impeccable reputation, ran into this problem. Of the 100 stations which received the material only about 40 made use of it.

The four speakers left the audience with the general impression that, in both the print media and television, *a favorable climate exists for more substantive programming and reporting on scientific subjects*. However, there is still some resistance on the part of editors and producers so that careful salesmanship and packaging is necessary. When well-edited, newsworthy stories, particularly those showing the human side of science, are presented, audiences will be interested in scientific news.



Joan Lurie teaches physics and computer programming at Rider College, Lawrenceville, New Jersey, where she has been a faculty member since 1972. Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1941, she received her Bachelor's degree in physics from Brooklyn College in 1961, Master's degree in physics from Rutgers University in 1962 and Doctor's degree in theoretical solid state physics from Rutgers in 1967.

Dr. Lurie held post-doctoral appointments at Rutgers University and University College, London, and also several industrial positions in physics and computer software before coming to Rider College. At Rider, Dr. Lurie is President of the Rider College chapter of the American Association of University Professors. Her present interests include image analysis (pattern recognition) and the use of computer assisted instruction to improve the effectiveness of physics teaching. In a more extra-curricular vein she is Treasurer of the American Physical Society's Committee on the Status of Women in Physics.

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