



Scientists go public

Brian Garman

Brian Garman, a plant pathologist and freelance journalist, recently launched a science journalism course at Rhodes University.

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– Microbiologist Ed Rybicki**

Most of science in South Africa came of age during the apartheid era – an era of exclusivity and secrecy; a period when public accountability was a very low priority. For many scientists, this was a time when funding was relatively easily available and came with almost no requirement that research results be made accessible to an audience wider than their peers. But now with government funding dwindling, scientists are having to compete in an increasingly politically-charged funding arena. Facing a threat to their professional existence, scientists have decided to come out of the closet.

In addition, the increasing democratisation of our society requires that people be familiar with all areas of public endeavour that affect them. “In an increasingly technological world, democracy demands that the voters have an awareness of scientific issues and options, and of their limitations and consequences,” says Anthony Tucker, former science editor of the Guardian.

The development of South Africa as a whole is inextricably linked to the development of science and technology. The government’s 1996 White Paper on Science and Technology states that “innovation has become a crucial survival issue. A society that pursues well-being and prosperity for its members can no longer treat it as an option”. Dr Khotso Mokhele, president of the Foundation for Research Development (FRD) says “an increase in effective science, engineering and technology education and awareness will help make South African industry more competitive; contribute towards the sustainable development of the environment

and lead to an improved quality of life”. Pieter Cox, managing director of Sasol, concurs. “A winning nation requires the science and technology skills to make South Africa a desirable destination for investment.”

But years of isolation have created scientists who are inexperienced at having to explain the complexities of their work to a largely scientifically illiterate audience. At the same time, the public – including the media – has become alarmingly disconnected and unfamiliar with the basic tenets of science and technology, even when achievements in both areas have become essential to modern life. “What is it about the scientific enterprise that puts so many products and innovations at people’s fingertips, and yet society is so unknowing or even uncaring about it?” asks Mokhele.

Most scientists now recognise that they are going to have to take the demands for greater public accountability seriously, and that the mass media are usually the most effective way of meeting those demands. But scientists tend to find the media difficult to deal with.

One of the reasons for this is that it is only recently that popularisation of science has become an obligation. In the past, communication with the public through the media was done by scientists who felt like it – and knew how to work the media to their advantage. These Lady Di’s of the science world include respected scientists like Carl Sagan, Stephen Gould, Richard Dawkins, Oliver Sacks and Stephen Hawking. We could probably include South Africans Philip Tobias and Francis Thackeray in that group, but apart from them there are few South African scientists who cope well with media that is largely inexperienced with the intricacies of reporting science.

Scientists accuse journalists of being sensationalist, populist, misleading and cavalier with the facts. Dr Patricia Whitelock of the South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO) cites an example of a Cape Town newspaper which headlined a story about an SAAO scientist saying that the Hale-Bopp Comet was going to crash into the sun. “What the scientist actually said was that the comet might break up as it went around the sun – the same way Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 did when it went round Jupiter.” While this is not going to radically affect the progress of science, it is highly embarrassing for

the scientist involved and damaging to his reputation.

The journalist was oblivious of the implications. Whitelock continued: “When my colleague complained to the paper he was told not to worry, they would write something the next day and he’d get his name in the paper twice. If that’s the way journalists work, it makes me dubious about stories I read in the papers on subjects I know nothing about. If journalists are cavalier about the ‘hard facts’ then they are not going to be taken seriously by scientists or anyone else.”

Dr Ed Rybicki, a microbiologist from the University of Cape Town, complains about what he calls the “science as a threat school of journalism”.

“The best example of this recently will have to be the Dolly episode, where some unfortunate sheep had half the world’s press shoving cameras up her nose and writing all sorts of guff about how people would now clone Saddams.”

And the experiences of Whitelock and Rybicki are not isolated cases. A survey involving 26 scientists at Rhodes University indicated that 81% had experience of working with the media, but only 62% had satisfactory encounters.

More than three quarters of those who were satisfied, however, said that it was either because they had written the copy themselves or had closely controlled the whole process.

While scientists are quite nervous, they are still keen to talk to journalists. But they are talking about a more controlled process – demanding that journalists be “suitably qualified” to report on science, or that they get to see the finished product before it gets on air or is printed. But this is a situation that the media is unlikely to tolerate.

As Graeme Addison of the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism says, the media is not here to do public relations for scientists. “Science is an industry,” he says, and should expect the media to play the role of a watchdog just like it should do for any other industry.

Whatever role the media see themselves playing, there is definitely room for improvement. Journalists do need to understand and respect the intricacies of scientific methodology, the influence of the peer review system and the scientific sensitivities that can be easily bruised by the shoddy and inaccurate reporting that characterises much of the science journalism in South Africa.

Entries are invited for South Africa’s first **Science & Technology Journalism Awards**, coinciding with 1998, The Year of Science and Technology. Winners in seven categories stand to win R5 000 each, while the overall winner will walk away with R15 000. The prize money and competition are sponsored by the eight science councils of South Africa and the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology.

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For more information and an entry form, contact: Marina Joubert at the Foundation for Research Development, tel: (012) 481-4055, fax: (012) 481-4134, e-mail: marina@frd.ac.za
The closing date is 12 January 1999. Winners will be announced during April 1999.