

Book Review

A Scientist's Guide to Talking With the Media. Practical Advice From the Union of Concerned Scientists, by Richard Hayes and Daniel Grossman (Rutgers University Press, 2006, 2005) 200 pp., ISBN 0-8135-3858-0; \$18.95 paperback)

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Driving into work recently, I heard an interview on the BBC that forcefully made the point for why this book is necessary. The interviewer was speaking to two scientists about a just-released UNESCO report on agricultural reforms toward sustainable agriculture: one from an agribusiness firm that opposed the report as being anti-science, the other from the committee that had drawn up the report based on two years of work and contributions from over 400 agricultural scientists. The interview was one-sided, not because of interviewer bias (though the interviewer did seem to me to be trying to stir up controversy), but because of the difference in the ability of the two interviewees to respond to the interviewer's questions. The agribusiness scientist was clear and concise, answering in brief bullet points, always on message. The committee scientist, on the other hand, was rambling, beginning each question with a rather general preamble and background, hedged with qualifications, promising to get to the point, but never quite making it before her time ran out and the interviewer moved on – all windup and no pitch, as it were. I suspect the two went away with very different reactions – satisfaction on the one hand, and frustration on the other. The committee scientists should read this book.

A Scientist's Guide to Talking With The Media comes under the heading of “things they didn't teach you in graduate school that they should have.” Graduate studies do a superb job of developing the analytical and manipulative skills that scientists require to do our jobs and to present our results to the public, but all too often they pay virtually no formal attention to developing the nonscientific, practical skills necessary to communicate the results of our work to the broader public. Yet elected representatives, that ultimately determines the level of support for our research. It is a reminder that scientists and journalists to some extent live in separate cultures, accustomed to appealing to different audiences, subject to different time constraints in their work, having different notions of the most important way of communicating a story, having different understandings of,

and even different interpretations of, common words. The fact that they also most often are the products of different educational cultures (C.P. Snow's "literary" and "scientific" cultures) further heightens the problem. Given this mismatch, it should not be surprising that scientists often seem to be talking (and writing) past, rather than to, each other, a situation further exacerbated by the fact that continuing job contraction in both print and electronic media has meant fewer and fewer reporters who focus solely on science stories.

In this brief (200 pages) and eminently readable book, Richard Hayes, media director of the Union of Concerned Scientists, and Daniel Grossman, a science journalist and educator, have set out to ameliorate this situation from the scientific side by providing scientists with a wealth of background information on, and practical advice for communicating with, the media. It includes all the "immediate" topics one might have anticipated (for instance, during an interview the best way to put your story into "salable" terms, how much detail to include, and how to avoid getting "off message"), plus a more long-term or what might be called an "anticipatory" view that includes how best to build up relationships with reporters, the various formats to use in providing information on potential stories.

Hayes and Grossman begin in Chapter 1 ("We Need to Talk") by sketching the outlines of the problem, then move in Chapter 2 ("Hope For The Best, Prepare For The Worst") with several accounts of what can go wrong in an interview or afterwards.

The meat of the book begins in Chapter 3 as the authors guide the reader through what might be called an anthropological introduction to the world of the media ("Why Reporters Do What They Do"), pointing out the hurdles that reporters must surmount in creating a story that will be of sufficient interest to justify an editor's dedicating precious column inches or broadcast minutes to it. They continue in Chapter 4 ("Do You Hear What You're Saying?"), by reminding scientists that an interview is not a presentation to peers at a scientific meeting and therefore requires close attention to communicating the basic "take-home" message by using clear, concise, vivid, pictorial language, a practical "hook" that people can identify with, and sound bites that will be most suitable to incorporation in an article or newscast, points on which they expand in Chapter 5 ("Mastering The Interview").

Most universities publish lists of "expert" faculty members whom reporters can contact for background on breaking stories. However, Hayes and Grossman argue that simply waiting around for a reporter to find you is a statistically inefficient way to get your work into the public arena. Thus, they devote Chapters 6 and 7 to considering how to take a proactive, rather than passive, stance toward the press by developing ongoing relationships with reporters through suggesting story ideas or commenting on breaking

stories or topical issues (“A Reporter’s Most Trusted Source: You”) and the various vehicles that can be used for this purpose, such as press releases, op-ed pieces, press conferences, etc. (“Choosing The Right Communication Tools”). They conclude with a final chapter on “The Scientist As Celebrity And Activist” by pointing out that not every scientist needs to become a public figure at the level of a Carl Sagan or a Stephen J. Gould (and indeed, most might cringe at the prospect), but that we need to recognize that, as a part of the wider social fabric, making the public aware of what we do, why we do it, and why they should care (and continue to support us) is part of our civic duty as citizen-scientists.

A Scientist’s Guide To Talking With The Media is definitely required reading for any contemporary scientist who believes that his/her work has a value beyond one’s own amusement or enlightenment. Older generations of scientists (read: mine) could sometimes indulge in the ivory-tower fantasy that their work was for the enlightened (i.e., their peers), that its value should be self-evident, and that any attempt to communicate or justify it to the “great unwashed” was a form of pandering, somehow demeaning, and definitely a waste of time better spent in the lab. That view, in addition to being naïve, is also profoundly undemocratic, and unrealistic in today’s society, where everyone both benefits from, and helps to fund, the research establishment. *A Scientist’s Guide To Talking With The Media* can provide scientists with both a challenge to re-envision their relationship with the media and a set of helpful tools for bringing it about.