

The Science Communication Conference
22nd – 23rd May 2003

Session3: Different Perspectives

Chair: **Professor Robert Worcester, Chair of MORI**

Pallab Ghosh, BBC: covering controversy: behind the headline

Thank you very much Bob and thank you all for inviting me to speak to you for a reporters perspective on the controversial issue of reporting science responsibly. Now, the easy option for me is to side myself with the group of journalists that many in the scientific community would regard as responsible, usually the science correspondents working for the Nationals, New Scientist, the BBC, and hold my hands up in horror at the activities of general news correspondents and the tabloids. The result of that would be a great deal of tut tutting, back patting, and even more feelings of mutual superiority. But that wouldn't get us very far. So, you will be please to know that's not what I am going to do.

I would also say that I am not here to defend bad reporting either. There are agendas out there, particularly by people who own the media who put pressures on sub editors to write the headlines, draw up the front pages to hide the stories to sell the morning papers, or to push a political point of view, in the case of the pill scare or stem cell research. And of course there's plain old incompetence, but my argument is that to view the journalistic process as unable to report difficult or controversial issues is incorrect and it misses the point. And the problem can't be overcome purely by calling for science stories to receive special treatment, or for those in the scientific community to have their views respected as gospel, and the views of pressure groups not to be represented at all, and there is pressure for that to happen in the wake of MMR and so forth.

I'm here to say that the media is what it is, and in fact it's changed immeasurably in the past 5 years, it's a 24 hour, 7 days a week monster. It needs constant feeding and the speed of information transferred across the

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world is ever-accelerating. And the real question that I'd like to put to you, is whether the people trying to get the message across, you, have adapted. Whether you are adequately equipped to get that message across. Do your organisations invest properly in the communications professionals it employs? Are there people that really understand how to deal with the crisis situation, properly valued? And are they properly paid by their organisations? And, more importantly, do they have enough clout to tell their bosses to change their diaries to respond to big moving stories? I don't think a lot of you are. Particularly about the pay. A cheap way of getting you on my side.....

In my experience a lot of people are very good, but they aren't valued, they have little power and they are often the last people to find out what is going on. They don't have enough authority, so when something happens they are restricted in what they can do. The result I think is, slow inappropriate responses which often backfire. I can only touch on some of the cases in the remaining time that I have, but I hope we can focus more on that in the discussion afterwards, but let's look at MMR. I see that Professor Ian Hargreaves has produced a report that you might be aware of on the media's coverage of MMR. And surprise surprise the conclusion is that the media got it wrong, and the public were duped by the coverage. Now he's a former head of BBC News, and he knows what he's talking about. He's got excellent judgement. For example, he was the man that hired me to the BBC, so

His survey showed that 53% of those who were surveyed at the height of the media coverage of MMR assumed that because both sides of the debate received equal coverage there must be equal evidence for both sides of the argument, and only...I don't know how well his polling was, but he also said that 23% of the population were aware that the bulk of evidence favoured supporters of the vaccine. And he talks about a feeding frenzy. All of this is true, and it did have a real impact, with cases of measles emerging as a result and a growing health threat to pregnant women and newborn children. But shouldn't a study also be carried out into how the Department of Health and associated scientists dealt with the story? Because of the experience with

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whooping cough when the Department of Health in the 1970's gave way to public concerns about the vaccine, and offered whooping cough as a separate vaccine it resulted in a case of whooping cough outbreaks, and understandably the department and the scientific community remembered that experience and came down very hard against Wakefield and subsequent media reports.

Many talked about the certainty of how safe the MMR vaccine was. Many began to rubbish Wakefield himself, and there was talk about the single jab vaccines being unlicensed. Now, the last time that lone voices were shut up and government scientists were pronouncing on absolute safety was the BSE crisis. And that's what MMR turned out to be. BSE mark II, a cover up. It wasn't about the rights and wrongs of the scientific argument, something that many of you probably knew at the time, but didn't have a chance to influence what the media coverage was all about. With every assurance of safety a new piece of research seemed to emerge, suggesting that there might be something to worry about. Yes, there was a frenzy, yes the media might have whipped it up, but was the zero tolerance the right one? Did it create the impression of a government more concerned about its own interests, rather than addressing the anxieties of parents? I would also remind the audience that the whole thing started, not by the media, but by a paper in the Lancet.

Now, something was touched on earlier. I think a case where this issue was dealt with correctly was with response to concerns about mobile phones. Sir William Stewart's report reviewed the literature, and rather than say there was nothing to worry about, it said that the balance of evidence suggested that mobile phones didn't pose a risk to people's health, but there were anomalous results which suggested there might be non-biological effects, and that more research needed to be done, people should be aware of those risks and children should be discouraged from making unnecessary phone calls. The Stewart Report treated us like grown-ups.

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Of course we want to stop bad science being hijacked by vested interests, but what was being expressed in another scare story over GM crops were all sorts of other issues that the public were concerned about. The fact that they were having a technology forced upon them for the benefit of the producer. More intensification and they quite literally had a belly full of that, and not least following the BSE crisis, the public didn't trust the scientific community or the government.

The front page of the Mail is very good at identifying what people are thinking, and much more could be achieved by realising that and engaging in the debate rather than dismissing it. As I see it, the science communications industry is still wedded to the deficit model. The fact that even now it's in the business of filling empty vessels. It's still an elite preaching to a largely middle class converted, as we've discussed, and not listening to an intelligent and discerning public. For example, we are having a national debate on GM crops. It's supposed to be a dialogue. This word is used an awful lot. We are going to listen to the public. Ministers are going to listen to their responses and do what? The decisions about commercialisation have already been taken. It's in the European Legislation, so you know, even if the government wanted to do something about it they couldn't, so what's the point? It's yet another example of a dialogue rather like that of an indulgent parent listening to a particularly difficult child.

In summary I would like to acknowledge that we in the media are by no means perfect but the scientific community could do better in itself, and value and raise the status of communications professionals such as yourselves.