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INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM: DEAD OR ALIVE?

EDITED BY
JOHN MAIR
RICHARD LANCE KEEBLE



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The Editors

John Mair is Senior Lecturer in Broadcasting at Coventry University. He has won the Cecil Angel Cup for enhancing the prestige of Coventry University in 2009 and 2010. He invented and produces the weekly Coventry Conversations. He is a former BBC, ITV and Channel Four producer/director on a wide range of programmes from daily news to investigative documentaries on *World in Action* to more considered pieces on *Bookmark*. A Royal Television Society Journalism Award winner, he publishes widely in the media and journalism press including the *Guardian*, bbc.co.uk/journalism and journalism.co.uk. This is his sixth co-written or edited book. For the BBC, he co-wrote *Marx in London*, with Asa Briggs, in 1981. With Richard Lance Keeble, he edited *Beyond Trust* (2008) *Playing Footsie with the FTSE? The Great Crash of 2008 and the Crisis in Journalism* (2009), *Afghanistan, War and the Media: Deadlines and Frontlines* (2010), *Face the Future: Tools for the Modern Media Age* (2011), all published by Arima, of Bury St. Edmunds. He is on the editorial board of *Ethical Space* and chairs the Institute of Communication Ethics. He is also a judge for the RTS Journalism Awards and the Society of Editors Press Awards.

Richard Lance Keeble has been Professor of Journalism at the University of Lincoln since 2003. Before that he was the executive editor of *The Teacher*, the weekly newspaper of the National Union of Teachers and he lectured at City University, London, for 19 years. He has written and edited 20 publications including *Secret State, Silent Press: New Militarism, the Gulf and the Modern Image of Warfare* (John Libbey, Luton, 1997); *The Newspapers Handbook* (Routledge, 2005, fourth edition); *Ethics for Journalists* (Routledge, 2008, second edition); *The Journalistic Imagination: Literary Journalists from Defoe to Capote and Carter* (Routledge, 2007, with Sharon Wheeler) and *Communicating War: Memory, Media and Military* (Arima, Bury St Edmunds, 2007, with Sarah Maltby). He is also the joint editor of *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics*. He is the winner of a National Teacher Fellowship in 2011 – the highest prize for teachers in higher education.

What is a Science Journalist for: Communication or Investigation?

Connie St Louis argues that too few journalists are holding scientists properly to account. PR directors now set the agenda and foist their priorities on time-pressed science reporters

The role of a science journalist is a complicated and contested one in the modern world. To understand why there have been recent major failures in the reporting of science, particularly in the area of investigative journalism, I will argue that science journalism operates within a tightly controlled system of constraining narrative conventions.

“Science” itself occupies a muddy realm in the popular imagination – variously invoking areas of study from certain aspects of the social sciences (such as demography and economics) to the so-called hard sciences (such as astronomy and biology). The role of the journalist encompasses a similarly broad field of endeavour, from print to television to radio to the blogosphere.

At the same time, both the world of science and the world of journalism are undergoing major challenges, given technological changes that are proceeding at nothing less than revolutionary speed. The rates of discovery in scientific fields such as genetics or physics present challenges to the descriptive powers of even those with greatest expertise. And as the speed of internet publication has encroached upon the parameters of traditional print media, the ethics and standards of investigative reporting are being tested as never before.

There is no denying the time pressures and information overload on all journalists. A particular problem, however, faces science journalists. It is one that I believe encourages passivity. The amount of research and scientific information that a science journalist has to wade through is oceanic. A glance at the inbox of any science journalist will show the avalanche of emailed embargo press releases and content pages from the exponential growth in science journals.

No time for science journalists to investigate

With so many outlets to file stories to in their publications there is simply no time for journalists to find and investigate stories. That task has been abandoned by publications and it is organisations with media and PR directors who now set the agenda. They drive science journalism and foist their priorities on time-pressed science reporters who, wearily, manage to find time to rewrite the press release by demystifying the complex scientific language or arranging a broadcast interview with the scientist in question, which can then be edited for time and clarity.

As a journalism educator I endeavour to equip my students with the skills to produce ethically sound, accurate information for the public good: an increasingly challenging endeavour in an era of social networking technology where facts are sometimes hard to sort from rumour or half-truth, and where the difference is increasingly treated as irrelevant.

So how can the traditional journalistic role of serving a well-informed public be advanced in time of:

- a.) confusing information overload;
- b.) arcane or nearly untranslatable scientific concepts, and
- c.) the propagandising effect of money that literally talks.

Over-reliance on a few peer-reviewed journals

One of the most important constraints is an over-reliance on a very few peer-reviewed journals, owned by large profit-making multinational corporations. The *Lancet*, for example, is owned by Elsevier, the journal *Nature* by NPG. These journals, which are committed essentially to profit-making, in turn, vie for international prestige by seeking not only to publish the latest discoveries but to further publicise those findings popularly, most often via weekly embargoed press releases. There are, however, significant disparities between the vocabulary of specialised scientific disciplines and the common parlance of popular television outlets, chattering-class magazines, and broadsheets. The ability to translate from one to the other ought to be a priority in the education of science journalists, for the impact of such press releases is quite significant in leading or misleading public understanding.

Another complication in conveying scientific information is the tension between academic standards for publication and the high-pressure “scoop” mentality of popular publication. Within the university settings where much scientific discovery takes place, credentials are enhanced by projects that often take years of research, review and editing. In the world of journalism, by contrast, there is value in rushing things to press before anyone else sniffs out a given story.

Somewhere in between, there is the world of scientific discovery that occurs in the research and development sectors of organisations such as pharmaceutical companies and genetic engineering venture capital start-ups. For these latter, where knowledge is packaged as “product”, there may be an image-driven desire to suppress certain insights that could depress sales on the one hand, as well as an interest in publicising the investment promise of certain discoveries well before all the facts are known.

Great deference to traditional sources of authority

Another dimension of scientific review is the great deference given to traditional sources of authority amid changing systems of verification and value. Science journalists often assume that the publishing of a paper in a leading journal such as *Nature*, for example, is a stamp of scientific validity and that there is no need to check the underlying data before reporting the story. With the heightened difficulty involved in understanding and

interrogating scientific data, journalists must be trained to overcome such challenges.

Reproducibility, of course, is the central concept of the scientific method, and requires the formulation of a hypothesis, a programme of experimentation which involves the systematic observation of those experimental results, the tabulation of information gained, and the final correlation and/or modification of the organised data with the original hypothesis. As a measure of truth, it is in some ways different from tests of veracity in other fields.

Normativity, for example, might be relatively more authoritative in the social sciences. In legal trials, demeanour or appearance passes as a cipher for credibility. And in much of journalism other than scientific journalism, dealing, as it so often does, with singular or exceptional events, it is the rhetorical or persuasive power of words themselves that dictates not just what is “known” or not, but sufficiently and lucidly enough conveyed so as to be conjured and comprehended by those who were not there.

Wide range of skills required for science journalists

Being a science journalist requires an uncommon combination of skills: dedication both to the fact-finding mores of traditional journalism which relies on precision of language, context and innuendo; plus the mores of the scientific method, which require technical precision of an incalculably more refined order. With both feet in two disciplines, I am keenly aware of crucial methodological differences. If traditional journalism relies upon the kind of investigation that allows a complete representation of a particular event or situation, science writing places more emphasis on the underlying empiricism and reproducibility with which outcomes are supported.

The former requires a facility with language as paramount value; the latter requires facility with data. The incredible advances being made in these fields of biotechnology and neuroscience will have repercussions that lay audiences as well as scientific sophisticates will have to be able to discuss. Their political import will or ought to become part of the public domain; these discoveries will become increasingly important foundations for discussing topics as various as genetic modification, eugenics, invasive surveillance and pharmacological products.

The opportunity to design and direct the Science Journalism Masters programme at City University, London, focused my concern that much of what was being produced in the field was about telling science stories rather than investigating science. It was my observation that too many journalists approach scientists as priests rather than as fallible sources thereby rendering themselves as unquestioning vessels as opposed to professional diggers and reporters.

The majority of the students seeking to gain admission on to the MA science journalism course tell me at interview that their primary motivation for wanting to be science journalists is to communicate science. They want to be torch bearers of science, to correct erroneous facts, oversimplified concepts and misrepresentations of science and medicine in the media. They also want to engage the public by ensuring science is understood.

Much of science journalism is PR

These are honourable aims and perfectly reasonable goals but they are ones that should not be the mindset of a science journalist. They are the ambitions of science writers and communicators. Much of the coverage which passes under the name of science journalism is science PR and communications masquerading as reporting. This is to some extent understandable since science journalism began in the nineteenth century as science communication consisting of practical information such as farming techniques, home remedies and a sprinkling of sensational stories.

Recently, I attended a “Climategate” event at the Royal Institution in London which brought together the UK’s leading scientists and environmental and science journalists. Many of the journalists present recounted their disappointment with the scientists who had all refused to give any interviews when the leaked emails from the University of East Anglia’s Climatic Research Unit first broke. It transpired that most of the science journalists were considered to be too partisan by their news editors and other journalists were given the story to report. One journalist complained that the science journalists needed you to talk to them but the scientists went into their bunkers. “Our editors have always suspected that we were too close to you. By refusing to speak to us when we needed you confirmed this in our editors’ minds.”

This is a perilous moment for science journalism to be confused about its function. It needs clarity and purpose. Too often the stress in science reporting is on new discoveries, new wonders, new devices, new findings, new gadgets and new promises. Where are the investigations which analyse the distribution of scientific and medical resources? Who is scrutinising and calling scientists to account? Who is examining the unacknowledged interdependence between science, medicine and politics? It's time science journalism came of age.

Note on the author

Connie St Louis is a Senior Lecturer and the Director of the MA in Science Journalism at City University, London. She is chair of the Association of British Science Writers (ABSW) and an award-winning broadcaster, science journalist and writer. She worked for BBC Radio 4 for fifteen years as a broadcast journalist. As a freelance she continues to present and produce a range of science and health programmes for BBC Radio 4 and World Service. She is a recipient of the prestigious Joseph Rowntree Journalist Fellowship. Her most recent programme on BBC Radio 4, which she produced and presented, investigated the use of racially targeted designer drugs by pharmaceutical companies. She also presented the landmark Radio 4 series "Life as" which charted the science of life before birth to death. Her recent book, *Reframing Libel*, is a collection of edited papers examining the government's Defamation Bill.

