

Training scientists to understand and love the media

By Toss Gascoigne and Jenni Metcalfe

Abstract

Scientists generally are fearful or suspicious of the media, especially if they have had little experience. The inexperienced scientists "essentially distrust the media and doubt the media's potential to help their science. They are particularly fearful of misrepresentation, inaccuracy, and loss of control; and see the media as exploitative and manipulative". (Gascoigne and Metcalfe, 1997)

Training in media skills can help overcome the barriers between scientists and journalists. Toss Gascoigne and Jenni Metcalfe have been running two-day media skills workshops for scientists in Australia over the past seven years. The workshops have also been run in South Africa and New Zealand.

An essential element to the workshops is the involvement of five working journalists. Many people in this area recognise the cultural barriers between the scientific and media worlds. Scientists have a stereotypic image of journalists and journalists have similar images of scientists, views often shared by the public. For example, scientists participating in focus group discussions felt that the public saw them as "boring men in white coats in a world of their own, people whose actions and motives are to be regarded with suspicion or distaste" (Gascoigne and Metcalfe, 1997). Journalists are also aware of their negative image in the community and the poor ratings their occupation gets in opinion polls.

An initial assessment of the workshops found that "most of the media workshop graduates feel that they have better control over their media appearances, that it is helpful to their communication efforts, and that they now feel more comfortable working with the media". (Gascoigne and Metcalfe, 1997).

This paper outlines the workshops, summarises the response of the participants to these workshops, and describes a change in attitude by participants towards journalists over the course of the workshop.

The workshops

The workshops generally run for two days, and involve a maximum of ten scientist participants. They use two presenters to ensure that the sessions are lively and entertaining, and to ensure that each participant gets individual assistance and feedback. They have been especially designed for scientists and technical people and are not run for any other groups in the community.

At the beginning of each workshop, participants are asked to select (from a list of eight options) the three top things they wish to gain from the course. The most popular response in every workshop is "tailoring a scientific message to suit the media, without compromising the quality of the message" (Gascoigne and Metcalfe, 1998). The least

popular response is generally "understanding the pressures and constraints under which journalists work".

Five working journalists (usually two from TV and radio, and one from print) are brought in to lead sessions on their area of expertise, and to give all participants experience in being interviewed. Each of the journalists gives an informal presentation about how their particular media operates, and what they need to make a science story work for them.

Demonstration interviews by journalists are given in front of the whole group, and then each participant withdraws to do individual interviews with journalists. Feedback on performance and story value is given by both the journalists and the workshop presenters. Despite their initial lack of interest in the working life of journalists, the scientists have plenty of questions to ask them about their routines.

Some time is spent on examining the reasons why scientists should communicate. These may include:

- maintaining or increasing funding
- improving the image of the organisation
- ensuring that the public has access to correct information
- for public accountability (usually public funds support the research)
- to improve the adoption of technology
- to gain personal recognition

One of the ways cultural barriers between industry and researchers can be broken down is through public dialogue. The media plays a vital role in enabling this dialogue, by publishing simple and accessible explanations from the point of view of all the groups involved. Scientists with a desire to commercialise their work have often found the media a useful tool to help them reach partners in the process.

What do scientists think of the media and journalists?

Scientists are generally suspicious of the media, especially if they have had little experience. Such inexperienced media performers "essentially distrust the media and doubt the media's potential to help their science. They are particularly fearful of misrepresentation, inaccuracy, and loss of control and see the media as exploitative and manipulative" (Gascoigne and Metcalfe, 1997).

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At the end of each workshop, participants complete an evaluation sheet. Of the 84 participants in ten workshops in Australia and New Zealand surveyed for this paper, many (81%) mentioned their interaction with journalists as a highlight of the workshop:

“I liked the contact with working journalists”
“It broke down our prejudices about journalists”
“The opportunity to experience interviews with different media was great”
“Being able to talk to working journalists and see them as people not to be feared”
“Practical hands-on experience at delivering interviews with real industry people”
“It was interesting to get insights into journalists, their job, their pressures, what sells a story and how best to do it”

This was also true for scientists who participated in workshops in South Africa.

Changing their minds about journalists

Media skills workshop participants in Australia were asked to state their views of journalists. A sheet with 12 words was distributed at the beginning of the workshop, and participants rated journalists on a one ("strongly agree") to seven ("strongly disagree") score for each word.

At the end of the workshop after they had had intensive dealings with five different journalists, they were given an identical (but unmarked) sheet and asked to score the words again. The sheet contained both positive and negative words:

- Helpful
- Reliable
- Sensationalise
- Trivialise
- Thorough
- Accurate
- Distort
- Superficial
- Interested
- Concerned
- Unprincipled
- Trustworthy

The views of the same 84 scientists as above were collated, and the "before" answers compared to the "after" answers. The results show participants changed their views of journalists over the course of the two-day workshop quite markedly, and were much more positive about journalists after meeting them.

After the workshops participants were more likely to think of journalists as helpful, thorough, concerned, reliable, accurate, trustworthy, interested and hard working. The average change measured over all 84 responses to the 12 questions was an average swing of about one in a positive direction. In other words, if a participant had scored journalists as "3" on the word "sensationalise" at the beginning of the course, at the end they would re-score them as "4".

In many cases the differences were quite dramatic. Seventy four of the participants changed their score on the word "sensationalise", all of them in a positive direction. Fifty seven changed their score on "unprincipled", and again, all in positive direction. "Distort" got 56 changes, 54 of them positive (but two responses were negative). "Trivialise" (40 positive, 6 negative) and "superficial" (+31, -4) also drew strong results.

The journalists' views

The media skills workshops could also be called "scientific skills for journalists". For many journalists this is their first contact with scientists, and some are initially either nervous or expecting to be bored by dull stories about jargon-ridden scientific work.

Instead the journalists find the atmosphere relaxing and the scientists much less threatening than they had expected. They find many of the stories exciting and want to write or broadcast them. It is rare that at least some media coverage does not emerge from each workshop.

In responding to a questionnaire, journalists who had participated in recent workshops were generally enthusiastic about the value of media skills training:

"I think the workshops are extremely useful in training scientists to deal with the media, mainly because they teach scientists to speak like 'normal' people."

"Really, we're quite nice people, and all we want is to have a clear and concise chat about new scientific breakthroughs. Easy!"

"They break down the fear barrier, and encourage scientists to think of the importance of their work in a way the general public can understand."

"I think these workshops are a very valuable part of improving the way in which scientists can tell their stories and make science more relevant."

"I was refreshingly surprised by their desire to become media savvy. All had good stories to tell and most were able to express themselves in easy to understand terminology."

In conclusion

Interaction with journalists over a two-days media skills workshop is quite powerful in changing the attitudes of scientists. They leave the workshops seeing journalists more as potential allies than as a threat to be avoided.

Journalists also change. It is highly likely that they are now more aware of the scientific culture, evidenced by their willingness to participate in further workshops.

Media skills training is an important tool for helping scientists to feel more comfortable about working with the media. By getting scientists and journalists involved in a dialogue, it makes both sides aware of the constraints and pressures that the other operates under. The break down of such barriers should improve both the quantity and quality of coverage of science in the future.

References

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