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Excessive Hype Debases Science Communication

Rob Morrison says that excessive claims of “breakthroughs” reduce science coverage in the media, warranting an agreement on guidelines and protocols for science communicators.

Australasian Science has long argued that science communication is too often science spin, with terms like “breakthrough” and “cutting-edge” overused to impart (or try to impart) a sense of urgency and newsworthiness to accounts of routine research (e.g. “Science Suffering from Spin”, *AS*, October 2001, p.41).

This is by no means a local problem. A search for the use of the term “breakthrough” in 5229 press releases on EurekAlert, arguably the most significant global website for science news, throws up 2206 documents. “Cutting edge” scores 1127 times and “groundbreaking” comes a convincing third with 783.

The topic of hyperbole erupts occasionally on the discussion list of the Australian Science Communicators (ASC), and diverse views emerge. Some maintain that excessive hype in science reports debases the currency of science communication. Others defend the practice, even promoting it in media training that they offer. They argue that science is under-represented in the media, and extreme descriptions appeal to editors.

Such assertions need testing. One senior editor on the Board of the Australian Science Media Centre (AusSMC) derides the practice, dismissing his excessive daily barrage of “breakthroughs” as a joke. Another claims that he now puts less science into his newspaper than he did, fearing that scientists seem less interested in communicating their science honestly than in using media coverage to bolster their chances of winning grants.

Within the ASC there is at least a consensus that it is time to promote some standards in science communication. Ideally these should help practitioners communicate better, but they could also provide a counterpoint to the influence of some middle managers who are less interested in science communication than in promoting the profile of their employing institution, and who consequently encourage hyperbole in their media releases.

This is now a serious problem in science communication in the media. As research organisations are driven to seek funding from industry and private sources, their use of the media for self-promotion grows. If your job depends on hawking your employer’s scientific standing, it doesn’t take long before the taint of scientific overstatement colours your dealings with the media.

Add to that an increasing tendency for these institutions to put a media filter between journalists and the working scientists, and you’ll find that science reports in the media can be less reliable than they should be, while editors bombarded with this stuff elect to use less and less of it.

This filtering is in direct contrast to the aims of the AusSMC, which brings scientists and journalists into direct communication, assisting the former to understand how journalists work and giving the latter access to a range of experts who understand the value of communicating science accurately to the general public.

Some in the ASC have argued that a code of practice is pointless as it cannot be enforced, but others see

value in agreed guidelines that help young communicators and offer a first step toward the development of professional accreditation. It is a development welcomed by the AusSMC, which could then refer to such guidelines in its own dealings with journalists and scientists.

Draft guidelines for science communication in the media were recently posted on the ASC website (www.asc.asn.au). A separate protocol for issuing media releases by email is also in draft form. Too often these emerge with huge attachments and a host of other features that make them less than welcome in the congested mailboxes of journalists. It is hoped that a science style manual will complete the set, while there are also plans to develop ASC guidelines for science communicators in other fields, such as education.

Dr Rob Morrison is a freelance science writer and broadcaster. He first wrote on this issue in “Trust Me, I’m a Science Communicator” (*AS*, October 2001, pp.17–21). He is Vice-President of the Australian Science Communicators, and sits on the Board of the Australian Science Media Centre.

Among other work in science and its communication, Dr Rob Morrison currently produces an environmental segment on NEXUS, a TV program of Australia’s Asia Pacific Service, which screens in 40 countries.

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