

COMMENTARY; Rousing Science Out of the Lab and Into the Limelight

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Last summer, the pollster Daniel Yankelovich reported what might seem a strange finding: scientists are distressed by the media's insistence on presenting "both sides."

At first, I thought I knew what he was getting at in his paper, which appeared in *Issues in Science and Technology*, a publication of the National Academy of Sciences. From time to time, scientists have called me to complain that one or another of our articles was "wrong," in that it quoted (accurately) someone with whom they disagreed.

But this was not exactly the situation the scientists were complaining about. All too often, Mr. Yankelovich wrote, scientists who talk to reporters "find themselves pitted in the media against some contrarian, crank or shill who is on hand to provide 'proper balance.'" The scientists who hold this view have put their finger on an important problem. In striving to be "objective," journalists try to tell all sides of the story. But it is not always easy for us to tell when a science story really has more than one side -- or to know who must be heeded and who can safely be ignored. When we cast too wide a net in search of balance, we can end up painting situations as more complicated or confusing than they actually are.

For example, mainstream scientists who believe that human activities like the burning of fossil fuels are contributing to potentially disastrous climate change say we give too much space to climate dissidents -- those who argue that nothing is changing, or if it is that people are not causing it, and anyway the changes will be beneficial, or that if they aren't, technological genius will engineer a fix.



By now, it seems that the mainstream view prevails almost everywhere. The dissidents are widely regarded as outliers whose opinions are notable more for the cover they give politicians than their scientific rigor. But there are plenty of responsible people who still argue their case. And as journalists we feel obliged to report their arguments, especially since one who accepts those arguments is the president of the United States.

In any event, unless you are an expert, differentiating between the genius and the crank -- or even between the mainstream and the outlier -- may not be easy. As with other issues that plague scientists and journalists, we journalists cannot solve this problem ourselves. We will need the help of scientists. Will we get it?

I hope so, but a lot will have to change to make it happen. Relations between scientists and journalists are often adversarial.

Last month, I was a panelist at a meeting of the Pew marine fellows, eminent fisheries and ocean scientists whose work is supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts. Nancy Baron, a zoologist and science writer who works with the fellows, organized the panel as part of her longstanding effort to help scientists better communicate their work and its importance to the wider world.

As researchers have in the past, scientists at this meeting told Ms. Baron they had a simple solution to their problems with reporters. "I don't take their phone calls" was a common refrain.

Their unwillingness to talk to us is not mysterious. Far too often, talking to reporters is a no-win proposition for scientists. They communicate their findings in learned treatises published in peer-reviewed journals, not in lay-language news reports. Decisions on whether they will be given tenure, or promoted or awarded research grants do not normally hang on what appears in the public prints. If they are in the newspaper or on television or radio too much -- and their colleagues may set that bar rather low -- they become known as

publicity hounds or polemicists who have abandoned the purity of the laboratory for a life of celebrity.

And that's if things go well. All too often, they find themselves quoted in a report that is shoddy, inaccurate or overhyped. Pushy, unprincipled, ignorant and shallow -- those were some of the milder epithets the scientists at the Pew meeting applied to me and my fellow practitioners.

But not all the blame is ours. Yes, we occasionally get things wrong. Even here at The Times, which has unrivaled resources for covering science, we struggle to keep up with mushrooming developments in fields becoming ever more specialized. We need scientists' help to get it right. Sometimes even we don't get that help, and far too often our colleagues at other news outlets don't get it. Sometimes the scientist is just unable or reluctant to tell the story in words a lay audience can understand.

As a result, Ms. Baron told the Pew fellows, journalists regard scientists as elitist, unable to talk except in jargon, obsessed with trivial details, isolated in ivory towers and unwilling to take a stand on matters of public importance.

This last point is by far the most important because it is where science reporting stops being the "gee whiz" leavening in a heavy loaf of serious news reports and starts helping readers or listeners or viewers come to their own conclusions about the increasing number of issues -- global warming, reproductive rights, missile technology -- that hinge on science.

It is where the question of "balance" is most important and where journalists most need scientists to stop hiding in thickets of irrelevant detail and identify the bottom line.

In other words, journalists need scientists who are citizens as well as researchers.

A year ago, at another of the Pew panels organized by Ms. Baron, a scientist took me to task for The Times's coverage of creationism. The newspaper had followed the debate over whether creationism should be included in the Kansas public school curriculum, and had also written about the version of the doctrine called "intelligent design." In doing so, the researcher argued, we were only giving credence to ideas that had nothing to do with science.

My reply was, and is, twofold. First, when state officials seriously consider basing public school biology instruction on the Bible, it's news we have to cover. Second, where were the scientists? If the idea is so outrageous, where was their outrage? We hardly heard it, except in conversations among themselves.

"Science has reached greater heights of sophistication and productivity," Mr. Yankelovich wrote in his summer paper, but scientists' influence in public debates is actually shrinking.

As a result, he said, "the gap between science and public life has grown ever larger and more dangerous, to an extent that now poses a serious threat to our future."

Journalists can help narrow that gap. But only if scientists raise their voices in the nation's public debates.

Drawing (Drawing by Hadi Farahani)