

Scientists see bright side of working with media

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Once upon a time in the world of science, sharing your work with the press was heresy. Journalists, according to the common wisdom, would get it wrong, your research would be distorted, and your colleagues would see you as little more than a shameless grandstander. Scientist popularizers such as the late Carl Sagan, a master of adroit science communication, were excoriated by some of their colleagues for the questionable practice of trying to make science accessible.

But a sea change is under way, it seems. In a report published this week (July 11, 2008) in the journal *Science*, an international team of communications researchers reports that relationships between scientists and journalists are now more frequent and far smoother than the anecdotal horror stories scientists routinely share.

"Scientists actually see rewards in this process, not just pitfalls," says Sharon Dunwoody, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor of journalism and a co-author of the new report.

What's more, a majority of scientists surveyed - 57 percent - found their "latest appearance in the media" to be a mostly positive experience, while only 6 percent were unhappy with the journalistic outcome.

The *Science* report is based on a survey of more than 1,300 researchers in five countries: France, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States. The poll revealed that, for the most part, scientists felt their work was portrayed accurately, explained well, and that news

reports were generally complete and unbiased. Journalists, according to survey respondents, were perceived as responsible and informed in their reporting.

The new study was directed by Hans Peter Peters of the Forschungszentrum Jülich, Germany, and sampled researchers in two broad and well-covered scientific fields, epidemiology and stem cell research.

The results of the survey suggest that scientists' perspectives of the news media have evolved during the past 15 years, says Dominique Brossard, a UW-Madison professor of journalism who is also a co-author of the report.

"Clearly, the survey shows that scientists see interactions with journalists as necessary," Brossard explains. "We don't have to convince the scientists anymore. We're beyond that."

Although scientists may no longer need to be persuaded to engage journalists, many still view the practice of journalism as incompatible with scientific culture. However, that perception, say the authors of the new report, seems to be more nuanced than in the past.

What may be driving the change in scientists' behavior, according to Dunwoody, is the prospect of rewards. Science that is more visible appears more credible to potential funders, and news coverage may enhance individual scientists' career prospects. Another driver, say Dunwoody and Brossard, is that scientists see a benefit of greater public understanding of the scientific enterprise through news coverage of research.

The survey, which included responses from 358 U.S. scientists, indicated few differences in scientists' perceptions of interacting with journalists

from country to country, possibly because the cultural norms of science are universal.

The scientists in the survey who interacted most with journalists tended to be more senior, more productive researchers, suggesting that journalists do a better job than scientists think of finding the best people to talk to. "Journalists are attending to the highly productive scientists," Dunwoody explains. "That's good news and gives less credibility to the notion that journalists pay too much attention to outliers."

The survey also suggests scientists are becoming more knowledgeable about how journalists work and are thus more skilled at working with reporters. "Scientists in this survey are quite savvy in their interactions," says Dunwoody.

Although the results of the poll are generally good news for both scientists and journalists, the researchers caution the picture is far from complete. In some fields where social controversy is more acute - climate science and evolutionary biology, for example - surveys might paint a different picture, the researchers caution.

Source: University of Wisconsin-Madison

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