Science and media disconnect? Maybe not, says a new study

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The prevailing wisdom among many scientists and scientific organizations is that, as a rule, scientists are press shy, and those who aren't are mavericks.

However, a new study by University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers, published in the current issue (summer 2009) of *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, suggests otherwise. The study, conducted by journalism professor Sharon Dunwoody, life sciences communication professor Dominique Brossard and graduate student Anthony Dudo, provides evidence that many mainstream scientists occasionally work with journalists and some do so routinely. And the interplay between scientists and journalists, say Brossard and Dunwoody, has been remarkably stable since the 1980s.

"By and large, scientists speak to journalists, they know it is important and they're willing to do it again," Dunwoody says. "The frequency with which scientists and journalists interact has been pretty stable over time."

The findings, extracted from a survey of 1,200 researchers in the areas of epidemiology and stem cell research, two fields that experience extensive news media attention, contradict the widespread view in science that scientists are out of touch.

"We found relatively frequent interactions," says Brossard, explaining that about one-third of the respondents claimed to have had up to five

contacts with journalists during a three-year period, while another third of the sample said they experienced more than six contacts with reporters over three years. Only one-third of respondents reported having no contacts with journalists.

"The frequencies are definitely encouraging," adds Brossard.

The proportion of scientists in the sample who interact with journalists, according to the Wisconsin researchers, is intriguingly similar to studies from the 1980s, as well as patterns identified in the 1990s. The new data imply that journalistic engagement of scientists over time is greater and more stable than "persistent, anecdotal cautionary tales would suggest," Dunwoody, Brossard and Dudo write.

Another key insight from the data is that it is generally not the case that journalists focus their attention on scientific outliers. Instead, scientists who interact most frequently with reporters tend to be senior, highly productive researchers or administrators. "The notion that journalists concentrate on mavericks is not true," says Dunwoody. "That's an important pattern. What it says is that journalists are working mostly with successful mainstream scientists."

The results of the new study are important because they chip away at the common perception among scientists that media coverage of science is flawed. "We don't know if the interactions are, in fact, better," says Dunwoody. "But scientists are eager participants. It reflects a more active role by one of the major players in the process."

The new study, according to Dunwoody, indicates that although scientists may have a general perception that news media coverage of science is faulty, that perception does not extend to coverage of their own work. "They often view their own work as being covered well, but that doesn't influence the larger perception."

The involvement of scientists in active public communication is widely viewed as critical, especially when controversial issues are at play or important policy is being forged. Coverage of such things as stem cell research, infectious disease, nuclear power, nanotechnology and biotechnology frequently entails important information about human health and has economic and social implications that reach far beyond the scientific community.

"We need to keep in mind that most people learn about scientific topics through mass media and not informal channels like science museums," says Brossard. "Hence, the necessity for scientists to engage journalists."

Another key insight from the study is that the scientists who work with journalists perceive that they do so not for personal gain but because their participation can influence public understanding of science and the role of science in society. In short, appealing to scientists' moral or ethical values may be a way to increase participation in the process of making news.

Finally, the study provides evidence that scientists who have been trained or otherwise briefed about how to work with journalists are more likely to engage reporters.

Source: University of Wisconsin-Madison (news : web)