

Reducing science to sensational headlines too often misses the bigger picture

April 30 2015, by Leon Vanstone



“This theory complex but important and – hey look, it’s Kim Kardashian!”
Credit: Ed Schipul , CC BY

We are all being lied to, but it's okay because we sort of know it.
Exaggeration, sensationalism and hype are in the newspaper headlines

and on the magazine covers we read and in the films we watch. Even the conversations we have with each other are exaggerated to make things sound that little bit more interesting. But what happens when you try to sensationalise science, and put little lies into something that revolves around truth?

The role of science in society is changing. Science is now in the mainstream, with "science editors" commonplace. But the little lies are creeping into science, designed to sensationalise, to entertain, to generate clicks online, to sell newspapers, and to make science sexy.

Missing the point

The best way to illustrate this problem is with an example. There is an ambitious idea called the [Skylon project](#), essentially a [rocket plane](#). Rocket planes are an excellent way to get to space, but building an engine is difficult. However, Skylon recently achieved this with their [SABRE engine](#). This was widely reported with headlines tending toward the likes of "[Now Possible to Get to Australia in Four Hours](#)".

In order to understand why that is important, a little context: rockets are a terrible way of getting to space. Large rockets weigh close to 1,000 tonnes, yet can only carry around ten tonnes of payload into orbit. Worse, most of that rocket gets crashed into the ocean in the process, and those rockets aren't cheap.



The Wright Brothers first flight. CC BY

Imagine if every time you took a flight you had to pay for the entire cost of the aircraft – ticket prices would go up, and the number of aircraft available would go down. The Skylon rocket plane is the first, completely reusable way of getting into space. This means in comparison to non-reusable rockets, rocket planes such as Skylon would hugely increase capacity and availability of flights and lower the cost of flying people and cargo into space. Everyone who could afford to buy a sports car could now afford to go to space.

Getting lost in the headline

Yet all the reporting of Skylon's new engine chose to focus on the idea that it would be possible to fly from one side of the world to another in hours. Sure it's attention grabbing, but it misses the point. It's like being alive in 1903. At this point in time, the only way to fly was with a balloon or glider. Then the Wright brothers invent powered flight. With the ambitions of many from Icarus to Leonardo da Vinci finally realised and mankind able to take to the skies, it would be absurd to report it with the headline: "Now Possible to Get to the Shops in 30 Seconds".

We all know that powered flight changed the world. A century after the Wright brothers' breakthrough, two billion people and [40m tonnes of cargo](#) were transported that year alone. Just 110 years later [Voyager 1](#) would become the first man-made object to leave the solar system entirely.

Think about that. Only a century after we worked out how to take off from the ground, we managed to leave the solar system. And you're telling me that the most interesting part of the SABRE engine is that you can get to Australia in four hours? No. Not even close. We are potentially ushering in a whole new era of human existence.



Tracy Caldwell Dyson viewing Earth from the ISS Cupola, 2010. Credit: WikiCommons

Yet somehow this message gets lost in the sensationalising of the world around us. Modern society has become obsessed with short-term gains and creating the illusion of progress and achievement. That is why popular media is full of these little lies and it is why we are trying to make science sexy.

Beauty is in the bigger picture

But when you make science sexy you lose the beauty, and there is tremendous beauty in [science](#). That beauty is hope. Science is the hope

of a future. Because if we just sit here on this planet and do the things we already do, getting places just a little bit faster, living just a little bit longer, happy to simply survive as we are then we know how humanity's journey ends – and it will end, here, on this planet.

But if we do more than survive; if we discover and explore and expand, then our future is uncertain. Science is a demonstration that humanity need not exist only on some tiny rock in the outer spiral arm of a single galaxy. To me, it means that humanity refused to go gently into that good night. Will it make it? Who knows – but it's important that we try.

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