

Media Skills Workshops: Breaking down the barriers between scientists and journalists Jenni Metcalfe and Toss Gascoigne

By Jenni Metcalfe and Toss Gascoigne

Introduction

Most people working in the field of science communication recognise the cultural barriers that exist between the scientific and media worlds. Scientists have a stereotypical image of journalists, and journalists have an image of what scientists are like. Both these views tend to reflect the views of the general community.

The scientific and media communities also appear to be aware of the sorts of stereotypes that exist about themselves. For example, scientists participating in focus group discussions felt that the public saw them as “boring men in white coats in a world of their own, people whose actions and motives are to be regarded with suspicion or distaste” (Gascoigne and Metcalfe, 1997). Journalists are also aware of their negative image in the community and the poor ratings their occupation gets in any opinion polls.

The stereotypical images of scientists and journalists are compounded when these two cultures interact, due to the inherent differences between the two groups.

“Scientists see science as a cumulative, cooperative enterprise; journalists like to write about individual scientists who have made a revolutionary breakthrough. Journalists like controversy; scientists thrive on consensus. Journalists like new, even tentative results with exciting potential; scientists prefer their results to go through the slow process of peer review and settle into a quiet, moderate niche in the scientific literature – by which time journalists are no longer interested. Scientists think that accuracy means giving one authoritative account; journalists feel that differing views add up to a more complete picture. Journalists’ work has to fit the space available; scientists’ academic papers can be of any length. Scientists work at the pace imposed by the nature of the research; journalists are in a hurry to meet a deadline. Scientists must qualify and reference their work; journalists have to get to the point.” (Shortland and Gregory, 1991)

Scientists generally have a fear or suspicion of the media, especially if they have had little experience with the media. Such inexperienced media performers “essentially distrust the media and doubt the media’s potential to help their science. They are particularly fearful of misrepresentation, inaccuracy, and loss of control and see the media as exploitative and manipulative” (Gascoigne and Metcalfe, 1997).

Training in media skills can help overcome the barriers between scientists and journalists. The authors have been running two-day media skills workshops especially designed for scientists in Australia over the past nine years. These workshops have also been run in South Africa and New Zealand. When past workshop participants were surveyed (1997), most of them felt that since the workshop “they had better control over their media appearances, that it is helpful to their communication efforts, and that they now feel more comfortable working with the media” (Gascoigne and Metcalfe, 1997).

We believe an essential element to the workshops is the involvement of five working journalists. This paper describes how participants in the workshops rated the value of the workshops, and how attitudes towards journalists were changed over the course of the workshop. It also gives some preliminary insight into how being involved in the workshops may have also helped to change some of the attitudes of journalists towards scientists.

Media Skills Workshops

The design of these workshops has evolved over the past nine years and each workshop is different according to the nature of the participants and journalists involved. The key features of the workshops are that they:

- are two-days in length and highly practical in nature
- involve a maximum of 10 participants
- use two presenters to ensure individual assistance and feedback

- include five working journalists from TV, radio and print
- include interviews of all participants by each journalist

The workshops have been especially designed for scientists and technical people and are not run for any other groups in the community. A set of notes is provided to workshop participants, however this is used as a reference document rather than a workbook.

At the beginning of each workshop, participants are asked to list the three top things they wish to get out of the workshop from a list provided. The most popular response in every workshop is “tailoring a scientific message to suit the media, without compromising the quality of the message”. The least popular response is generally “understanding the pressures and constraints under which journalists work”.

Each of the journalists participating in the workshop gives an informal presentation about how their particular media operates, and what they need to make a science story work for them. Demonstration interviews by journalists are given in front of the whole group, and then each participant withdraws to do individual interviews with journalists. Both the journalists and the workshop presenters provide participants with feedback about their interview performances and the best way to shape their stories.

Evaluation of media skills workshops

At the end of each workshop, participants are given an evaluation sheet to complete. Evaluation results are always very positive despite the initial reluctance of some participants to spend two days away from their research. Most (greater than 80 percent) of the workshop participants mention their interaction with journalists as the highlight of the workshop with statements like:

“I liked the contact with working journalists”

“It broke down our prejudices about journalists and exposed the areas where we the talent can be at fault and can improve”

“I was impressed by the ability of the organisers to bring in working journalists, who provided very good exposure for me to their ideas and profession”

“I liked the open discussion with journalists, and the interviews and feedback”

“I liked the opportunity to get the inside story on how the news media think and operate”

“The opportunity to experience interviews with different media was great – an excellent group of journalists”

“Being able to talk to working journalists and see them as people not to be feared was the highlight”

“I like the practical hands-on practise at delivering interviews with real industry people with relevant experience”

“The practical experience/input and feedback from real working journalists was a real bonus, and it will enable us to meet and refer back to these media contacts in the future”

“It was interesting to get insights into journalists, their job, their pressures, what sells a story and how best to do it”

Participants views of journalists

In our workshops, participants are asked to rate their views of journalists at the beginning and end of the workshops. They do this by completing a sheet where positive and negative words (as indicated below) are separated by a seven- point scale.

Not helpful	Helpful
Unreliable	Reliable
Sensationalist	Non sensationalist
Trivalise	Serious
Rough	Thorough
Distort	Accurate
Superficial	In depth
Bored	Interested
Unconcerned	Concerned
Unprincipled	Principled
Lazy	Hard working

Untrustworthy Trustworthy

Some of the participants initially complain about “generalising” about journalists, saying that some journalists are good to work with while others are not. However, comparing the before and after assessment of journalists indicates that workshop participants are much more positive about journalists after interacting with five of them over two days.

In particular, after doing the workshops participants are more likely to think of journalists as helpful, thorough, concerned, reliable, accurate, trustworthy, interested and hard working. On average, workshop participants do still tend to think of journalists as being superficial with a tendency to trivialise or sensationalise their stories. However, participants record positive changes to these three words and are less likely to think of journalists as being likely to sensationalise, distort, trivialise or be superficial about their stories.

The journalists’ point of view

The media skills workshops could also be called “scientific skills for journalists’, and for many participating journalists this is their first contact with scientists. Many of the journalists are excited about the stories presented to them during the workshops, and it is rare that at least some media coverage does not emerge from the workshops.

A questionnaire was recently faxed out to 45 journalists participating in workshops.

The questionnaire was returned by 10 journalists, who were generally enthusiastic about the value of media skills training:

“I think the workshops are extremely useful in training scientists to better deal with the media, mainly because they teach scientists to speak like ‘normal’ people.”

“Most of the scientists in the workshop in which I participated had never had much media contact, and they were anxious about dealing with the media. I’m sure we managed to show that really, we’re quite nice people, and all we want to achieve is to be able to have a clear and concise chat about new scientific breakthroughs. Easy!”

“Media skills workshops not only provide an important understanding to scientists of the different roles of the media but also the necessity to convey material to the public in a more understandable manner.”

“It is valuable to have people in the media meet scientists and explain how the system works.”

“They show media people as doing a job (breaks down the fear barrier), and they encourage scientists to think of the importance of their work in a way the general public can understand.”

“I think these workshops are a very valuable part of improving the way in which scientists can tell their stories and make science more relevant.”

Of the 10 journalists returning the questionnaire, four had at least some contact with scientists before participating in the workshop. This included three science journalists working in the print media and on television. As such, these journalists were unlikely to have changed their views about scientists over the course of the workshop. However, some of the journalists less experienced with science stories did note some changes in their perception of scientists:

“I was refreshingly surprised by their desire to become media savvy. All had good stories to tell and most were able to express themselves in easy to understand terminology.”

“It gave me a good opportunity to discuss various issues in more depth than usual.”

“I have found that media skills workshops have widened my outlook on reporting science and technology mainly because of my direct interaction with scientists.”

“Some participants reinforced a perception that scientists stay within their comfort zone – won’t make statements unless they’re qualified by the research evidence. However, a number were quite receptive to making science sexy.”

All of the journalists found stories that were media worthy from the workshops they participated in, however some were unable to follow up on stories immediately due to changes in their jobs. One of the radio journalists who responded to the questionnaire also said she made some very valuable long-term contacts from the workshop. Another TV journalist said she specifically followed up a weather story on the Seven Nightly News Network and found it “an easy story to arrange, and the people involved were cooperative”.

The seven non-science journalists found science difficult to report when the issue was complex or people did not explain it clearly – “the difficulty is usually breaking complex issues into something palatable and picture-friendly”.

Most of the journalists (8) questioned thought science got a reasonable run in their paper on their station.

However, most thought scientists could work to improve this coverage:

“Scientists need to have more access to workshops like yours (and not just once) and be assured of complete support from their scientific and administrative bosses.”

“Scientists need to communicate with us and let us know of developments.”

“Scientists should be more proactive in promoting/selling their stories.”

“The challenge for scientists is to find a way to make their work interesting for most people, and to feel comfortable about being more vocal about their achievements.”

“There is a definite need for scientists to greatly improve their understanding of the media which will in turn not only improve their relationship with journalists but also help to boost the image of themselves.”

Conclusions

Scientists and journalists come from two different worlds. One side is characterised by a methodical and precise assessment of data from close analysis over an extended time period. The other side wants simple, direct and speedy answers uncluttered by qualifying statements. The two groups are mutually suspicious of each other.

However, it is clear that interaction with journalists over a two-days media skills workshop is quite powerful in changing the attitudes of scientists towards journalists. Scientists leave the workshops seeing journalists more as potential allies than as a threat to be avoided. This backs up past research by the authors which found those scientists experienced with the media are “far less likely to be victims of the media but instead attempt to use the media to serve their personal and organisational agendas” (Gascoigne and Metcalfe, 1997).

The media skills workshops expose scientists to working journalists through informal discussions and individual interviews over an intense two-day period. Such workshops appear to mimic the experience gained by seasoned media performers in changing the views of scientists about the media. At the very least, media training provides scientists with an appreciation of the world of journalism and the constraints and pressures under which journalists operate.

The participation by journalists in the workshops also appears to make them more aware of the particular concerns and constraints that scientists operate under. It is highly likely that such journalists, especially the non-science general journalists, are now more aware of the scientific culture and ways to work within that culture. However, more research is needed to fully evaluate the impact of the workshops on the journalists involved.

Media skills training is an important tool for helping scientists to feel more comfortable about working with the media. It does help break down the barriers between scientists and journalists and makes each aware of the constraints and pressures that the other operates under. The break down of such barriers should improve both the quantity and quality of coverage of science in the future.

References

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