

Session II – Media
Moderator: Maria Zacharias

Panelists:

- **John Grassie**
- **Scott Jaschik**
- **Deborah Zabarenko**

The most important concepts to keep in mind for improving your interaction with the media:

Deborah Zabarenko:

1. More information than ever before. The web has added a lot to this information.
2. Need to be able to express your ideas clearly and simply. 700 words or less. Need to be able to include the science, the policy implications and the main points all in 700 or less words.
3. For scientists this means the need to develop a clear way to describe sophisticated work.

Scott Jaschik:

1. There is a great deal of media coverage for science, but much of it is poor.
2. There are few reporters who have “science beats” anymore. Most have a more overall science generalist role and often need to relate the science to policy.
3. A new challenge is the role of “ideology” being taken as science and the place these ideologies hold as hot topics with the public.
4. In many of the releases from universities, the research discussed is not seen as a hot topic with the public, and the release does not do as much as it could to advance the role and views of science.

John Grassie:

1. There are a much larger number of shows on science with cable channels ; thus there has been an exponential increase in programming
2. The challenge is how to engage people and keep their attention. How to help the audience see the value of science programming and the topics being presented to their lives?
3. For example, Mars probe landing on Sunday will hopefully be one of these hot topics.

Main Messages:

Deborah Zabarenko: networking outside of your field is important. If you stay narrow, so will your story. Help people “connect the dots” to see the relevance of your story to their lives and to gain insights into the important points.

Scott Jaschik: Network with journalists. Propose ideas for stories.

John Grassie: This “stuff” (science) matters! So work to get the message out.

Questions from the Audience:

Question 1: How can we better communicate science information today when it seems “moral values” and “ideologies” are speaking in the place of science?

Responses:

- Find ways to address an issue without calling it science, as science sometimes seems scary and daunting to some. Use “tell your family” type language. Use metaphors – but carefully – so all really understand.
- Scientists don’t always communicate as well as those with specific points of view; honing skills to do this would be valuable. Become a “hand waver” and raise your hand to be a helpful spokesperson for the science when you are qualified to do so.
- When reporting a “breakthrough” be conservative on timing or speed for cure or intervention to be applicable/commercialized. Talk about the protections in place such as those offered by the IRB.
- Use visual images to help illustrate your point; helps to create interest and a hook.

Question 2: Often the publication at the end of a research project is only about 3% of the actual work that went in to the research. How can scientists better portray the actual “doing” of the science? This could be exciting and maybe even a TV show...

Responses:

- TV shows are an option and have been discussed on some channels, but write about it. “A Day in The Lab” type of piece
- How about blogs? While the accuracy of them can be challenging, you can help make them a more reliable source of accurate information. Another example is Wikipedia. Many people complain about the accuracy – don’t complain, improve it!
- Remember about MSM (main stream media). This is a very valid way to get a message out. Network with MSM reporters to aid in getting the word out.

Question 3: 700 words and images is short. Is this need for speed and being terse a US phenomenon? How do scientists get a full hearing of their topic?

- Be selective in what you write. 700 words can convey a lot. Sometimes more words are just that – more words – but do not add a great deal of additional meaning.
- Use suitable graphics to aid in the telling when appropriate make the story as relevant as you can – locally and to the community you are trying to reach.

Question 4: To what extent can communication among various groups with different levels of understanding of an issue be improved? Who needs to take what actions to improve the dialogue among scientists, NGO’s, the legislative, interested citizen groups?

- Dialogue challenge may revolve around trust – or lack thereof - among groups and the positions they are presenting. An option is to invite a perceived opposing group for a dialogue rather than going “head-to-head” on an issue.
- Work at building relationships over time , not just sending press releases with potentially opposing views; let people in the door to become part of the discussion process.

Question 5: If shorter messages communicate your point better, what can scientists do to write this way?

- Focus on the impact of your science on people. Be sure the point of the article is clear.
- Engage your institutions’ information office and help them engage the MSM (main stream media)
- Find ways to engage and build relationships with local reporters. Reporters are trained to be fair and share “both” sides of a story; help them to get this. Be willing and available to help and engage

- with local reporters. Practice speaking jargon free and be prepared to explain simply and clearly when you are asked why your topic is important. Don't be surprised by the question of importance.
- Don't be afraid of controversy, be a positive and proactive force for your area of expertise.

Question 6: What are models or examples which doctoral programs could incorporate to aid in training to write for 700 word emphasis?

- Think of writing a letter to a family member about what you do and why it is important. Start from step 1 and do not use jargon in the explanation. Practice this capability.
- Think of writing from the standpoint of "here's the problem" and "here's the solution" in non-technical language.
- Don't be discouraged! Many times you write things and they are not immediately accepted.

Question 7: Feels as if there is a great inertia against science and facts. What can a scientist do, especially on controversial issues?

- Remember that engaging adversaries in a detailed way usually doesn't work. Help everyone to get the bigger picture of your points and remember to avoid jargon.
- Reference credible sources when you talk or write
- There is often an unclear understanding in the mind of the public about what scientific consensus means and how the process works. This is especially true with ongoing research – if there's ongoing research the general public may not realize that this will occur even if there is a consensus on a topic or an issue. This research is not necessarily in opposition to a prevailing view, and may be reinforcing.
- Be careful of the trap of saying "you don't understand". Work to distance yourself from a personal attack.

Question 8: Is there a distinction between "pure" and "applied" science and is this important in communicating science?

- Pure versus applied is not what is important. What is important is the result, the impact and the story of the science.
- Media is very interested in applications and relevancy.
- Celebrate the linkages between the two – which may be that in the beginning of the pure research there was an unknown which has now been answered and addressed with an application.