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Science Journalists: The Myth Is as Good as a Mile

Abstract

A paper presented at Mackinac Island, Michigan, July 15, 1981, "... to keep science journalism types from being so... serious that they can't communicate with anyone but other scientists or each other."

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Science Journalists: The Myth Is as Good as a Mile

Joseph J. Marks

Science journalists in colleges of agriculture, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the like are: (1) overrated, (2) pompous, (3) not very good at their work, (4) generally receive little support from administration, (5) don't really understand their administrator's problems, (6) don't visit enough with editors and broadcasters outside their shop, (8) tend to think that writing is supreme and ignore electronic media, (9) follow administrators like sheep when they get cockeyed ideas such as centennial observances, (10) get caught up in producing their own expensive media efforts instead of taking advantage of existing media, (11) don't always put their best scientists forward or know how to deal with the rest and (12) generally think ACE meetings aren't very valuable.

Now the dirty dozen in more detail:

1. Science journalists are overrated. Writing about science is no big deal—no bigger than writing about sports, politics or whatever. It's being a good journalist/reporter that is important.

2. Science journalists are pompous. Too often they write for scientists or worse yet they write for other science writers. (By the way, I apologize for the word "write." I'm

Marks is Professor and Science News Editor, University of Missouri. He presented this paper at Mackinac Island, Michigan, July 15, 1981, "... to keep science journalism types from being so ... serious that they can't communicate with anyone but other scientists or each other."

communicates about science. If I should use that word again, remember I'm talking about those who communicate about science.

3. Science journalists are not very good at their work. Admittedly, that's an overgeneralization that could be challenged all over the place. It's just that I've had the chance to see some pretty bad stuff handled under the guise of science communication.

4. Science journalists generally receive little support from the administration. Again, an overgeneralization. This is just what I've heard from information staffs around the country. Also, a survey of ACE members shows publications people outnumber press 2-3 to 1. And there are only four science writers per se.

5. Science journalists don't really understand the administrators' problems. Ah ha! And that may be the reason why they don't get much support. I spent a lot of time talking with deans and experiment station directors when working on ESCOP committees of the centennial observance. They do have some special problems (such as getting research grants, dealing with "significant others" on and off campus, etc.), and we usually aren't giving them much help.

6. Science journalists keep too much to themselves. I think all of us could use a sabbatical and get away from our shops and each other to get a fresh look at ourselves and our jobs.

7. Science journalists don't visit enough with editors and broadcasters outside their shop. (Enough said.)

8. Science journalists tend to think that writing is supreme and ignore electronic media. That's why I apologized for the word "write" earlier. Universities are loaded with print fanatics! But our publics sure don't get all their information from print media! My plea here is if you have a good story, get it out in as many media as possible. And, if you're uncomfortable in some of these media, get some help—from your shop or by simply contacting these media.

9. Science journalists (and I'm speaking of us, especially) follow administrators like sheep when they get cockeyed ideas such as centennial observances. Friends, we are the experts in communications. We must be more assertive when we feel quite sure that some of these cockeyed ideas are not worth the time and effort. A few of you know that I've been involved in some of these things—and I'm sick about

'em. Although I did go on record as opposing all that centennial observance baloney, I did finally go along with the majority and supported the effort. When you have no choice but to go along, my suggestion is to make the best of it.

10. Science journalists get caught up in producing their own expensive media efforts instead of taking advantage of existing media. Who needs the slick, four-colored publications or fancy slide shows when the world is full of good existing publications, television, etc. with audiences already established and people to help pay for the printing and mailing and so on?

11. Science journalists don't always put their best scientists forward or know how to deal with the rest. That's a tough one. A personal thing. I don't have the answers. I could use some help.

12. Science journalists generally think ACE meetings aren't very valuable. Many think this is an "extension show." Others don't even attend meetings because they're sure they'll be bad. And if they do attend, they just go to the programs and don't talk to anybody that might help them. ACE meetings are only as good as you are. And we're always looking for people to work to make ACE programs better.

Says Pogo (or was that Walt Kelly?), "We have met the enemy, and he is us!"

