

Water and Oil Don't Mix – on journalistic dissemination of research in news media

Charlotte Wien
University of Southern Denmark
chw@sam.sdu.dk

Abstract

There is a widely held notion that (all) research can and should be disseminated to a wider audience and that researchers, as well as journalists, may draw many benefits from collaborating in this manner. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the issue may not be as easy as such. There are substantial reasons why this effort fails time and again and that the effort frustrates both parties. This paper will, following a short state of the art, give an account of a research dissemination experiment conducted at the University of Southern Denmark. The experiment brought 10 researchers without media experience into collaboration with each their journalist without science communication experience. Their task: to disseminate the researcher's work. This effort gave rise to much reflection, but not publishable journalistic products about research.

Introduction

With its 200 million kroner budget, *Galathea 3* was the biggest and most expensive science communication experiment in Danish history. The project concerned a ship's circumnavigation with a number of researchers on board who were to collect and analyse data during the trip. In extension, a number of generalist news journalists were also on board to transmit results to the wider population.

However, in spite of the large budget and the support among politicians, researchers, and media, *Galathea 3* was not a success. This much was clear already when the ship was half way around the world. The occasion that made it clear was an editorial by journalist Anders Lund Madsen – who had been deeply involved in planning the expedition. This was titled "Den Sejlende Børnefødselsdag" [A Childrens' Birthday at

Sea], and was published in a national newspaper (Madsen, 2006). This was a well written, cheerful, and scathing critique of the whole project, where he claimed that the expedition was "bleeding to death because of idiocy, incompetency, and nonsense in general...", and that the expedition management had taken the step from being "...regular sissies to being full citizens of the country of stupid..." in their selection of research projects, which were in fact "mind-numbingly boring and without vision..." [my translation].

In the debate, which followed, the researchers and journalists agreed that the expedition had not been a success in terms of disseminating research in news media, but there was much disagreement about the causes of this. The researchers, on their hand, argued that Galathea 3 was a research expedition and that there should have been greater emphasis upon their needs. Likewise, the journalists argued that the expedition was one of dissemination and that it should have been arranged as such, whereby their need for photo opportunities and good stories could be covered. What was interesting in this debate was that the two fractions' needs seemed to be mutually exclusive: if the researchers were to be accommodated, it would have countered the journalists' requirements and vice versa.

In the science communication research group at University of Southern Denmark we consider Galathea 3 a paradigmatic example of an idea, which reigns in large sections of the population, among politicians, journalists, and even researchers themselves; namely that insofar as a researcher and journalist work together, and both parties are interested therein, the journalist can use their general journalistic "toolbox" to help the researcher disseminate research. It is therefore further assumed that – insofar as both are interested – they can benefit therefrom. The journalist gets the good story and the researcher gets publicity and goodwill from the population and the politicians. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that this is a simplification. It happens that merely bringing researchers and journalists into contact leads to successful communication of research, but there are weighty arguments why this fails so often. This will be shown in three ways: firstly I will show how the literature about science communication, although pointing to ever more researchers being visible in the media, also shows that there are good reasons to expect that the collaboration between researcher and journalist remains difficult.

Following this, I will give an account of the method for data collection in connection with a qualitative experiment conducted at the University of Southern Denmark. The experiment brought 10 researchers without media experience together with 10 generalist news journalist. Their task was to produce a journalistic article about the researchers work. This gave rise to much reflection and afterthought, but no publishable journalistic products.¹

The important and difficult encounter

Already in 1999 Nelkin noted that for budgetary reasons ever more news journalists – rather than specialised science journalists – are given the task of covering research (Nelkin, 1999). This can be considered problematic as much contemporary research is too complicated for journalists to understand (Tanner, 2004). As e.g. Russell points out: reading articles in academic journals has become increasingly difficult to read for people outside a narrow professional circle over the last fifty years (Russell, 2010: 19ff).

Therefore the public, the politicians, and increasingly the researchers themselves depend on news media for staying informed about research. In this sense media coverage of research and the use of researchers in news media have a huge influence upon attitudes towards research among the citizenry and politicians (Peters et al., 2008).

Fortunately a number of studies have shown that the working relationship between researchers and journalists over the past 10-15 years has become better and better (Bubela & Caulfield, 2004; Gascoigne & Metcalfe, 2010; Hargreaves & Ferguson, 2000; Mountcastle-Shah et al., 2003; Moyer, Greener, Beauvais, & Salovey, 1995; Peters, 1995; Reed, 2001; Roche & Muskavitch, 2003; Valenti, 1999) and that researchers are increasingly visible in news media (Albæk, Christiansen, & Togeby, 2003; Bauer & Gregory, 2007; Hargreaves & Ferguson, 2000). But digging deeper into these findings it turns out that far from all researchers are active in news media. Firstly, there is a significant ‘Matthew effect’, where the same researchers appear again and again

¹ The experiment is part of the project ‘Attention Wanted’, which is financed by the Danish research Council For Culture and Communication. I thank my colleagues Judy Hermansen and Per Østergaard for having contributed to the methodological development and the practical work during the experiment I also wish to thank Thomas Derek Robinson for translation of interviews and quotes.

(Albæk, 2011; Martin, 1991; Wien, 2013). Secondly, a recent Danish study reveals that more than 80 percent of the cases where a researcher is quoted in a newspaper his contribution is not to talk about research, but as an expert source to comment on today's news (Wien, 2013). The same study also shows that about 70 percent of the time a researcher is quoted in the media, he or she is either from the humanities or a social sciences (see also Albæk et al., 2003; Russell, 2010; Wien, 2001). In fact it remains relatively rare that researchers get media exposure for their research. Other recent studies document that the encounter between researchers and journalists continues to be a frustrating experience for both parties (Wien, Hermansen, & Østergaard, 2014).

What is it that stands in the way and why has the relationship between researchers and journalists since the 1970s been described with terms such as a 'gap' that should be bridged; as a 'distance' that should be diminished or a 'barrier' that must be forced, or with metaphors like the classic "oil and water" that don't mix (Peters, 2013; Wien et al., 2014)?

Several researchers have argued that the 'gap', 'distance', or 'barrier' occurs, because researchers and journalists construct knowledge by different and opposing principles (Peters et al., 2008; Reed, 2001; Russell, 2010; Wien et al., 2014) and that the only way to avoid conflicts of interest in a collaborative relationship is when one profession chooses to follow the other's rules of the game (Peters et al., 2008; Reed, 2001). According to Peters this is especially manifested when the journalistic news criteria are applied on research, since these do not match academic community's norms and standards very well with the (Peters et al., 2008).

The remainder of this paper will challenge and deepen this point through data from a qualitative experiment. I will show how the journalistic news criteria are in conflict with the academic community's norms and standards, and through data from an experiment illustrate how difficult the encounter between researcher and journalist can be.

The journalistic news criteria are not universal and vary between different cultures and different media systems (Boyd, 1994). However Galtung and Ruge have shown that some criteria are relatively consistently applied (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). There are five news criteria are highly institutionalized in the self-understanding of

Danish journalists and their editors. These are ‘Timeliness’, ‘Relevance’, ‘Identification’, ‘Conflict’ and ‘Sensation’. Although disputed among journalism researchers, these criteria are reproduced in different textbooks, taught to students of journalism (Schultz, 2007). These five Danish news criteria will be used as a guideline for structuring the analysis of data.

Design and Data

We conducted an experiment where researchers with no or relatively modest media experience and a generalist news journalist were to write an article for the regional newspaper concerning the researcher’s work. We chose this set up as we wanted to study the ‘gap’ or ‘distance’ between researchers and journalists. We assumed that if we had asked researchers with extensive media experience and experienced science journalists to write a piece for a special science supplement in one of the quality newspapers, their experience in following the other’s rules of the game would have made it impossible for us to obtain the necessary data. We selected ten researchers from various disciplines within the humanities, social sciences, and the natural sciences. The research represented areas of study that do not usually have easy access to media participation. We hired six news journalists with at least 12-18 months of job experience, who were taking an advanced degree in their field. Several of these had worked for the regional newspaper for longer or shorter periods, and knew the editorial process and target audience well. We furthermore allowed for wide latitude in defining the end product: 650 words per article and a deadline of around a month, but no requirements concerning genre, subject, style, or which section of the newspaper should be targeted. Initially we were not interested in the articles that were written, but stressed the opportunity to collect data that could provide insight into how a researcher and journalist saw the situation. We conducted separate semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), with researcher and journalist respectively, before and after the process of writing the article. Our experiments resulted in nine - and not, as expected, 10 - journalistic articles that dealt with the researchers' work. The 10th article was never written, because neither journalist nor researcher - despite mutual goodwill and sympathy - could find a media-suitable approach.

All interviews and coaching sessions were taped and transcribed, and the participants anonymised.

Analysis

Good intentions

As mentioned, the purpose of this article is to break with the idea that, insofar as one brings a researcher and journalist together, and both parties are willing, then they become able in unison to communicate the researcher's findings to a wider audience. For this reason the outset for the analysis is to show that there were good intentions among researchers and journalists. A journalist expressed it in the following words:

Interviewer: Why do you want to take part in this project?

Journalist: Because researchers and journalists can draw benefit from each other – that's why. I believe that we can collaborate: they can learn from us, or we can help them with the tools of dissemination, which they might not have known.

Johan, Journalist

The participants losing goodwill towards the other could also have caused the lack of publishable journalistic products. However, all participants – except one – expressed sympathy and respect for their collaborator and his or her disciplinary abilities, and indicated – after the conclusion of the experiment – that they wished to continue working with science communication. The newspaper did not lack determination in this regard either. In the session where the editor posed constructive criticism and coached the participants, he initially expressed that:

[...] well, I have been put in a hell of a position, because I am going to have to reject all your work. I should be able to tell you what to do instead, but I can't [...] Actually we have an explicit aim at 'Fyns Stiftstidende' [The regional newspaper] that we want to bring more of such articles, or at least this matter – science communication – in the paper. We are, in other words,

willing to go quite far to get this right, [...]. So, in every way [...], it would have been easier to merely print it and call it a job well done.

The editor

So we can determine that despite good intentions, it was not possible to generate journalistic products that were suitable for publication in a newspaper. This gives rise to the question: why did the efforts not succeed? In order to give a closer answer, we must initially take a look at the editor's criticism.

The Editor's Criticism

In the session where the editor gave a follow-up commentary, he dwelled on a number of issues in regard to language, genre, and format. Especially language and genre choices received harsh critique.

[The articles suffer from] poor disposition, combined with sudden attacks of self-aggrandisement, in addition to which we find theatrical and creative efforts by the author, [...]. [Another reason why the articles could not be printed in the newspaper is] that the articles show no concern for respecting traditional genre barriers [...], some begin with a field report [...], then a fact box about additional issues, and then the researcher goes off on a bloody tangent in some empty quote, and then – when all else is exhausted – the journalist concludes with a biography of the guy. I mean these articles are field report, interview, portrayal and history of science all in one. It just doesn't work!

The editor

In the following discussion the journalists defend their approach by noting that - because their traditional journalistic toolbox was not suitable for the task - they attempted to use them creatively. The example below is from an article. It shows what the problem looks like in practical terms. A journalist has been given the task of disseminating research into the philosophical foundation of quantum mechanics and begins the piece with the words:

Take a leap into quantum mechanics

It is easier to relate to a strawberry pie from the bakers; and yet this researcher thinks it is worthwhile giving quantum mechanics a chance...

Quantum mechanics. Dear me, you might think this is some weird theory in physics, but hang on. Imagine you are taking a shower. You feel the drops of water run down your arms and hear it run down the drain. You also see the steam rising and fogging up the mirror of your bathroom. This is a scene from everyday life – the reality your senses perceive. However, the world of reality is also made up of elements, which are not immediately visible.[...]

Julie, Journalist

The purpose of this opening is to hook the reader: In the first two sentences the journalist employs a zeugma, where two words or concepts not usually related are brought together for dramatic or surprising effect. In the subsequent bathing scene the journalist describes something everybody is familiar with in order to meet the journalistic criteria of Identification. In the remainder of the article she mixes interview, field report, and character portrait, since none of the established genres in journalism per se seem suited for the story she is trying to tell. The editor's criticism is thus legitimate. However, it is not because the journalist does not grasp the genres that she mixes them or pursues "creative writing", but because she understands that the journalistic tools are insufficient.

The editor's critique also concerns content: it here becomes clear that the editor is adamant that the reader must be hooked, since they in his point of view and as an outset are not interested and do not see the relevance.

[...] in general the stories lack 'a hook', there is no reason whatsoever the reader should begin reading it – I mean, they are conjured up out of nothing. You are reading the newspaper and are therefore not interested in bats. If you wanted to know about bats, you would Google them or go to the library. If you need to know about bats, you would simply not be searching 'Fyns Stiftidende' for information about them...

The editor

The hooks suggested to the journalist by the editor are about showing that the subject of the article meets the journalistic news criteria of Timeliness, Sensation, and Identification.² In other words in order to compensate for what the editor judges to be lack of Relevance, the remaining news criteria must be met. The editor continues that Identification can be attained by “packaging the story in a person”, i.e. making it possible for the reader to identify with the researcher or by generating a local setting or transforming it into “news-you-can-use”, that allows the reader to apply the knowledge attained in the article in some meaningful way.

Timeliness and Sensation

The Danish version of the news criteria is of course well known to these journalists, and several researchers also express knowledge thereof. The problem is however, that research can only rarely be submitted these. None of the journalists, for instance, were able to identify themes that expressed timeliness. The quote below is from the second round of the experiment, i.e. after the editor had specified the need for a hook. The researcher involved expresses how he and the journalist searched for a hook.

Researcher: [...] when she [the journalist] returned she said: ‘Ahh, it might be difficult to find a hook here!’ And her conclusion, with which I concur, was that the study was too old – it was from 2010. Then I found something different, something more abstract, about sanctions available in the Financial Services Authority. Once again it was an interesting subject, but we couldn’t find anything that would be relevant for ‘Fyns Stiftstidende’ [...]. I think she did well, but we simply couldn’t find that missing ingredient.

Nis, Social Sciences

Several of the journalists question the relevance of timeliness in regard to science communication during the interviews, but likewise recognise that without timeliness it is not possible to satisfy media needs.

² The editor does not mention Conflict. We assume that the reason for this is that with regard to journalism reporting on research ‘Conflict’ seems to be a less relevant.

The alternative hook, posed by the editor, could be “sensation”, but this also poses a number of difficulties. Especially among the journalists it gives rise to considerations. In their words there is often no sensation in the research. So, if needed, it must be generated artificially by cultivating a particular aspect of the project. However such effort makes the researcher navigate an area, which borders the standards and norms of science. Journalists are also critical of artificially creating sensations in science communication. One journalist describes it as follows:

Journalist: I would like to “take it up a notch”, because ...well... I’m afraid we have been accustomed to there being some kind of sensation, and because we are governed by the news criteria, which is a shame really.

Nanna, journalist

If journalists, in spite of this, still want to use sensation to hook the reader, they would meet resistance from the researchers, who have a negative attitude towards it. One researcher expressed it as follows:

Researcher: [...] and I am sick of the on-going hunt for sensations, the sensationalism, the “let’s make everything into a drama, a soap opera or a crime story” or whatever genre it is they keep using in those news programmes [...].

Sofie, Social Sciences

Since science communication in news media is difficult unless the researcher collaborates, the journalist risks sabotaging the task, because he or she loses the researcher’s goodwill.

Identification

The young journalist who was to write about quantum mechanics sought to generate identification by allowing the article to contain elements of portrayal and also

suggested that the article be given an image of the researcher in action. As the journalist notes about the situation:

Journalist: [...] this is because we spoke a lot about when he philosophised, to which he responded that he went for a walk and that it also occurred when he went shopping, or that he went to the beach and sat by the dunes. So, I said to him: it could be cool if we took a picture in the dunes, since it is a rough landscape. Then he could sit there and contemplate like a philosopher, right? But then he set up some personal boundaries about what could be photographed. [...]. So, it ended with a compromise, where he offered to do a photo at [...] some location in the woods by the university.

Julie, journalist

This attempt by the journalist to create identification with the reader by depicting and describing the researcher's person was viewed as transgressing a boundary by the researcher. Indeed, the researcher described the same situation in the following manner:

Researcher: [...] well, if it is meant to be so popular and entertaining that it can be read by everybody, then it is no longer about research, but about the person. I mean there was even an idea concerning a photo-shoot, where I jumped from one stone to the next, which was supposed to represent a quantum leap. I simply rejected this idea out of hand, since it would have been too embarrassing. [...] Jumping from one stone to the next, looking like I had had a good idea - I don't think so! It would be interesting, if it were Einstein, but not if it is me by the beach. It simply isn't! Some might find the personal angle interesting, but I think most would not, and they would not like their personal live put on review in that manner!

Jens, Humanities

Another way of creating identification is, as mentioned, by giving the story local relevance; but this is not easy either. Since there is growing internationalisation of research, researchers will be inclined to direct their attention towards examples and cases, which have relevance for the international community of researchers and therefore away

from the local environment. One researcher describes how his work could be exemplified using a national Danish bank, but not the local – competing - bank:

Researcher: [...] I was informed that it would be [...] best if there was a local hook, but this was not the case for ‘Jyske Bank’, and I was not willing to argue from the perspective of a customer, wherefore we could not agree on the proper approach...

Nis, Social Sciences

Both researcher and journalist are, or at least become, aware that timeliness, sensation, and identification are difficult issues to address, perhaps even impossible criteria to follow when it comes to science communication. Therefore the task – as the editor defines it – may be impossible to solve. And yet, all participants expressed enthusiasm and a willingness to keep on working with communicating science in news media. This is all connected to neither journalists nor researchers agreeing with the editor that timeliness, sensation, and/or identification being decisive for hooking the readers’ attention, because they assume, as an outset, that the readers are interested and therefore do not need a hook. One of the journalists expressed it as follows:

Journalist: [...] it seems like ‘Fyns Stiftstidende’ think they have no readers that would be interested in reading about frogs that can hear sounds through their cranium.

Interviewer: Do you agree with this assumption?

Journalist: Obviously this is a subjective opinion, but no, I don’t think they are right.

Nanna, Journalist

In the journalist and researcher’s perspective the public wishes to be informed and educated through science communication in news media. In this regard, the news criteria are a precondition for, but also an obstacle to, the success of science communication. This conception of science communication has been problematized by Sanden & Meijman (2008). However, especially the researchers adopt this view. One researcher describes it as follows:

Researcher: ... what is the purpose [of science communication], well in idealistic terms, I would say that it is public education, right?

Jacob, Natural sciences

As the researchers see it, being educated is a precondition for educating others, wherefore some view it as a necessity to educate the journalist before they start writing about their work. To do this, several of the researchers gave their journalists a number of texts to read as preparation for the meeting proper. The journalists dutifully read the material and to the extent the researcher got the impression that understanding had been attained, the journalists also received the researchers' respect:

Researchers: [...] he [the journalist] was very interested and seemed very sharp when he came into my office, and I actually got the impression that he was well motivated and did all the right things: I gave him some reading material, which I had already read, path breaking texts in my field [...] and then I gave him some contemporary texts which were founded on the older stuff, which he also read, and then he read two of my articles - one recently published and one forthcoming. We then had a telephone conference, where I got the impression he had understood my work. There was nothing wrong with his head in the least.

Martin, Social Science

In another case, the researcher held a lecture lasting a couple of hours. It is, in other words, the researcher's approach that becomes dominant for the overall process, which brings them into direct collision course with the media rules: No newspaper would have time for its journalists to read material to such an extent, or listen to a two hour lecture in order to write a 650 word article. Indeed, this is probably a major reason why it is extremely difficult and sometimes turns out to be impossible to generate science communication journalism: the media rules - manifested as news criteria - will counter the rules of research.

Conclusion

Our experiment of creating 10 journalistic articles on research, which could be printed in the regional paper failed. However, if one goes behind this fact and takes a closer look at why it failed, then the experiment suggests that Russell is right when he claims that the precondition for researcher success in media is that they play by media rules (Russell, 2010: 173).

When the interaction between journalist and researcher happens according to media rules, then relations seem to be easy and relatively unproblematic for both parties: in this manner, researchers can be fit into well-known journalistic formats (for instance the expert source format), traditional journalistic genres (background, news), and given journalistic news criteria.

However, when this relationship is turned on its head, when the subject being treated takes an outset in the researcher's work and not current affairs, and the initiative therefore does not lie with the journalist or media agendas, then the journalistic toolbox is no longer sufficient. The journalistic news criteria are not immediately visible and must be brought forth artificially, or relegated as a marginal aspect of the piece. Journalistic genres are not suitable here and must be mixed, whereby the journalist is forced into a role where he or she is to heighten public knowledge or promote enlightenment, which he or she is not trained to do.

In other words, this experiment suggests that Peters is right when he and others claim that because researchers and journalists construct knowledge according to different and incompatible principles, it is very difficult for traditionally trained journalist to disseminate research (Peters et al., 2008).

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