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Science journalism in Australia was born 40 years ago when the Australian Broadcasting Corporation recruited Dr Peter Pockley as Australia's first full-time science reporter and producer. The appointment had followed determined lobbying by leading scientists from the CSIRO and Australian Academy of Science who insisted that scientific qualifications were mandatory for any person filling the post (see pp.37-39).

Since then the field of science journalism has expanded. Now most metropolitan newspapers have a science reporter, but the ABC remains the only broadcaster with programs dedicated to science.

Yet these science reporters have become outnumbered by a legion of public relations operators acting on behalf of scientific institutions seeking to improve their "corporate" image. CSIRO alone has 150 science communicators, although this number includes programs targeted at schools and the wider community. The growth of this PR army has coincided with public mistrust over the handling of scientific issues such as mad cow disease, the safety of genetically modified foods and the necessity of embryonic stem cell research.

Science communication seems to be more about "managing the message" and less about new research. For instance, *Australasian Science* has found that only 4% of CSIRO media releases issued from September 2002 to August 2003 were based on original research published in peer-reviewed journals (*AS*, October 2003, p.44) while 30% promoted unpublished technological claims.

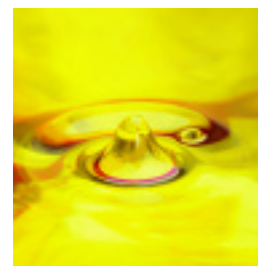
Julian Cribb, a former manager of CSIRO's National Awareness Program, says there has been "a disturbing departure from the principles of honest and open science communication in favour of corporate self-promotion, commercial hype and a growing secretiveness about the real work" (see *conSCIENCE*, p.43). This leads to "public mistrust in science generally" and "substitutes institutional vainglory for the reporting of actual scientific findings".

Rob Morrison questions whether science is "becoming the prostitute of the PR machine" as institutions sensationalise their science. He has found that "the message is being picked up, surprisingly uncritically, by the media and passed on to the public". Overhyped stories based on the potential of research are 20% more newsworthy than factual reports based on demonstrated achievements (p.40). He writes: "However you fudge it, a hypothesis is not a finding; not all findings are 'breakthroughs'; hoping to discover something is not the same as having discovered it; and whether your results are 'world-beating' should be determined by the world, not a PR staff member."

Morrison has called for "some code of practice that might help journalists, scientists and science communicators find a better common ground". He is also involved in the establishment of the Australian Science Media Centre, which will provide a network of experts that journalists can call on to evaluate claims made about science. But even this approach has been criticised by some journalists who trust their own contacts more than others put forward who may have their own agenda to push.

ABOUT THE COVER

A droplet of oil impacting on the surface of water. Removal of the minute quantities of oxygen and nitrogen in water can dramatically increase its ability to mix with oil. This finding raises the prospect of detergent-free cleaning and the production of drugs with no side-effects (see p.14).



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