

# The Ageing of Science Media

Robyn Williams laments the loss of talent and lack of fresh blood in science journalism.

When Dr Karl Kruszelnicki becomes Prime Minister, the number of science communicators in Australia will plunge disastrously.

This statement makes three assumptions. The first is that Dr Karl is equal in output to five normal science journos; second, that his political career will last longer than a picosecond; third, that his influence as a mentor will wane.

Personally I hope Dr Karl, who is standing for the Climate Change Coalition in the Senate, gets nowhere in politics, however worthy his intentions. His influence on air, in books and newspapers is tremendous, and to be similarly successful in politics he would have to combine the talents of Schwarzenegger, Mandela and Hillary Clinton. But it is as a mentor we should treasure our most visible science spruiker.

I was hired by *Australasian Science's* senior correspondent, Dr Peter Pockley, at the ABC in 1972. The "Commission" had all the collegial qualities of a top university. A number of seasoned broadcasters, including Peter, gave me instruction in a way I shall never forget. It set me up with a sceptical understanding of the science, a respect for the infinitely varied skills of presentation, and a love of writing.

Writing – that deceptive ingredient most people take for granted. Alan Oakley, Editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, told an audience recently that his hardest challenge was finding good young writers. Where have they gone? Everyone bangs on about the means of distribution or this month's shiny widget, but few worry about the words.

As for the youngsters, especially at your ABC, they've disappeared. The last person we hired in the Science Unit, where I am, was Richard Aedy 9 years ago. He now presents *Life Matters*. In 1996, as the huge cuts to the ABC budget (12%) became clear, I wrote to the then Science Minister, Peter McGauran, warning him of a likely collapse in science journalism. He responded quickly with a grant of \$2 million to be used for new ventures: online, National Science Week, fellowships and trainees.

The first intake of this new blood consisted of Paul Willis (now on *Catalyst*), Rae Fry (*Health Matters*, online), and Natasha Mitchell (now presenting *All In The Mind*). The second intake, 3 years later, was Mark Horstmann (*Catalyst*) and Maryke Steffens (ex *Catalyst*, now in London with David Dickson's SciDev.Net service).



Robyn Williams compering *Music & the Cosmos*, a presentation on astronomy by the University of Sydney's School of Physics and Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Photo: Jake Walker

That infusion of talent looks like being the last. Those of us regularly on air have no locums or young hopefuls keen to grab the mike.

OK, you snarl, times change – other outfits take up the slack. But do they? At the World Conference of Science Journalists in Melbourne last April it was the ABC that dominated the Australian numbers. Of those from other sectors it was clear that times were so dicey that many were considering joining the "dark side" (PR) or had already done so.

My point is that the underestimated craft of science communication doesn't just turn up in your noggin like nits at a primary school. Yes, the commercial networks, like Channel 7, flirt with science now and then by bringing back *Beyond* for a couple of years. Then it's gone, as once more the realisation comes that communication, like science itself, requires critical mass and time.

This is why I was shocked to hear about the demise of the ABC's Natural History Unit. Its role was to foster talent and expertise in a challenging field. You can't just dash out to the bush with your gear and have the animals perform as you require. If you are untrained there's a fair chance you won't comprehend what you are looking at anyway.

Of course, the independent film-making sector is important and times change, but is anyone out there actually training the next generation in the skills required? Has anyone asked?

I'll ask Dr Karl when he becomes PM.

Robyn Williams has presented *The Science Show* on ABC Radio National for 32 years, and is a Patron of *Australasian Science*. conSCIENCE is a column for Australians to express forthright views on national issue. Views expressed are those of the author.