Science and the media: time to experiment?

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The biggest stories of our age are based on science: global warming, abortion term limits, even the earthquake and cyclone disasters. And yet journalists, who usually have an Arts background, are notoriously poor at understanding the facts. Fiona Fox has written an excellent article about whether the media is getting better or worse at reporting in the age of what Nick Davies calls 'churnalism' in his book Flat Earth News.

This is not the place for me to rehearse my criticisms of Nick's thesis. My version is set out elsewhere on this blog and in my new book SuperMedia. Instead here's a few thought-provoking extracts from Fiona's article.

First she identifies what Nick Davies calls churnalism in science reporting:

> *"go to any of the annual major science conferences from the AAAS to the BA Festival and watch the media operation – it's almost unheard of for any of the science reporters to actually attend any sessions or mix with the scientists or public attending the conference. Instead they stay in separate buildings, attend a series of 20 minute press briefings and hear a five minute version of what the festival press officers have identified as the most newsworthy talks taking place at the conference."*

But she defends the PR people who (like herself) feed stories to the hard-pressed hacks:

> *"I'm sure the press team at the British Veterinary Association occasionally do 'PR' to get coverage – but my only experience of them over the past few years is of an amazing team working weekends and evenings to help the news media get access to the UK's best experts on foot and mouth, bird flu, bluetongue and so on. And that applies to many of the science press officers that we deal with."*

I think she correctly identifies that the worst science reporting happens when the specialists are sidelined:

> *"there are some terrible examples of grossly inaccurate media coverage in the news in recent years – but almost all of them have been written by non specialist reporters. Just this week we have seen what happens to the quality of reporting of human-animal hybrid embryos when the story passes from the science and health journalists to the political or lobby correspondents."*

I think that has always been the case. I think science has long been badly reported. This is partly because the scientists themselves are notoriously poor at communications. There are also a lot of special interest groups in science who don't want to explain themselves or have a very partial message to spread. And of course, there's a lot of bad science out there as the super-rationalist journalist Ben Goldacre continually reveals. It's also because even the specialist science reporters can 'go native' and lose their proper journalistic perspective.

The real question is what do we do about it? I think that the hard-pressed hacks have to make more use of new techologies to exploit the vast amounts of data and expertise that the public and other experts have. That may mean sharing the process but a bit more openess from everyone involved in science journalism would not go amiss.

Bear in mind Fiona has campaigned for the last 20 years for better coverage of science. It's her job to lobby the

media on behalf of scientists. Her previous connections to the Living Marxism/Spiked crowd meant that she was no stranger to controversy in the past with regard to her relationship to truth and the media. But she is now very open about what she is up to and her views are based on a lot of experience of how science journalism works in practice and what the boffins think about it.