

Covering Science:
Why the Media So Seldom Get It Right

by Stephen Peterson

Milton Rothman's article "Scientific Illiteracy in the Press" (Skeptical Briefs, March 1995) was right on target in its assessment of the sorry way in which the press handles stories on scientific subjects. I say that with some sadness because I myself am a working reporter and see examples of this scientific ignorance among my colleagues on a regular basis. I think, however, that it is not particularly surprising that so many journalists are scientifically inept. Reporters, their editors, and their publishers are no more literate in the sciences than are individuals in any other particular group of people, excepting scientists, of course, and even then some so-called scientists display little understanding of the core philosophy undergirding science and its methods. How could it be otherwise?

Journalism training in universities does not particularly encourage a knowledge of science as a tool in the reporter's working kit; thus reporters tend to be no more aware of the special rigors of science than do lawyers, CPAs, or dogcatchers, for that matter.

You would think that, since the press applies the skeptical razor to claims made by politicians (and, for the most part, does it well), it would make the same effort to examine critically the claims made by, say, psychics. Unfortunately, this often does not happen. As a rule, a newspaper's best reporters are not assigned to do the traditional Halloween haunted house story; this is most often handed to a junior reporter as a quickie feature assignment. Editors see these kinds of stories as "soft" news and use them as a way to liven up an otherwise drab issue, something "light" for those readers not interested in the latest doings of the city council or the Supreme Court.

Lofty assumptions about the role of the press in a democratic society aside -- and reporters and editors love to quote these assumptions -- media outlets are businesses, money-making enterprises that must cater to a fairly wide audience of readers/viewers. Scientists read the newspaper and watch the news, but so do believers in astrology or UFOs or ghosts, so provision must be made for them. No medium for the wide dissemination of information will long endure if it continually tells a significant portion of its users that they are stupid. So right in there with gardening tips and food preparation guides you find a daily horoscope or a wire service report telling of a psychic who located a cat lost in an airplane baggage compartment. A little something for everybody.

This is not necessarily a cynical attitude, merely a practical one, from the point of view of those whose livelihood depends on advertising dollars.

Those dollars depend on a demonstrated readership/viewership, and no media outlet will willingly cut off a significant source of its income. Newspapers and broadcast news outlets do take frequent, sometimes bruising stands that may cost them readers or viewers, but only when they perceive the stakes are high enough. For good or ill, the stakes in reporting scientific matters with consistent accuracy do not meet this test.

That is the fundamental problem with science and pseudoscience in reporting in the press. There is no perception of a need for a better public understanding of science sufficient to drive the press to take the necessary steps to provide it. That would require the wholesale re-education of thousands of journalists and editors, most of whom would frankly not see the need, and a fundamental restructuring of the journalism curriculum in hundreds of colleges and universities. But science as a prime story factor seldom crops up in the day-to-day reporting of most journalists, except for those who specialize in science. Such a reworking of the reporter's toolkit would simply not be cost effective. A science writer might need specialized training to write intelligently about the space program, but it makes little sense to publishers to retrain staffs of feature writers on the chance that one may write about the local palm-reader someday. On the other hand, no editor is going to re-assign a science writer from an article on new discoveries in astronomy to follow up on a

UFO sighting in a pasture in the next county.

The mainstream press, to remain viable, has in some way to mirror the wider culture in which it operates. Thus a popular interest in UFOs will eventually be reflected in the media, and pretty much with the same amount of skepticism (or lack of it) demonstrated by the public at large. Frankly, the average reader does not want to be told that his latest enthusiasm is a lot of malarkey, at least not right away, and the media know this.

So we are left with a chicken-and-egg conundrum: do we first change the culture to appreciate science and its methods and let the media follow, or do we re-educate the media and hope the culture will follow? I don't know the answer to this, but I suspect all our endless harping on the scientific ignorance of the press will do little other than make us feel better for having gotten it off our chests. For all the accusations - right or wrong - of the existence of a "liberal press," the media are extremely conservative institutionally in being so slow to change the way they do business.

And don't expect things to get better any time soon, at least in the print media. This year, massive increases in the cost of newsprint have driven papers to cut staff, to reduce the amount of space given over to editorial content (the newshole), and to generally be reluctant to alter the traditional ways in which news is covered. An article that presents the skeptical view of a paranormal claim is more costly in resources than one that simply states the claim and lets it stand. Again, not perceiving a general need to do otherwise, newspapers will most often opt to take the easy, less costly way.

Thus I suspect that we will be complaining about their coverage of science and pseudoscience for a long time to come.

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Sources: A Periodic List of Background Materials for Skeptics

This month: Evolution

Editor's Note: Readers of The REALL News often may wonder what sources they can use to study an issue in depth. I continue to look for recommendations and will pass them on to you when possible. Any list is certainly not definitive, but I hope it provides a springboard for further study.

This month, I would like to feature books on evolution that have been recommended before by Michael Shermer, publisher and editor-in-chief of Skeptic magazine.

Evolution: The History of an Idea (1989) by Peter Bowler (University of California Press); Science on Trial: The Case for Evolution (1982) by Douglas Futuyma (Pantheon); Creationism on Trial: Evolution and God at Little Rock (1985) by Langdon Gilkey (Harper & Row); Scientists Confront Creationism (1983) by Laurie Godfrey (ed.) (Norton); Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes (1983) and Bully for Brontosaurus (1991) by Stephen Jay Gould (Norton); The Creationists (1992) by Ronald Numbers (Knopf); Darwinism Defended (1982) by Michael Ruse (Addison-Wesley).

If you have any source recommendations on a particular topic on science, as well as on paranormal and pseudoscience issues, please send them to me at REALL by mail or e-mail. (See above).