Standing up for Science: Whose responsibility is it?

Kritika Samsi, Research Associate, Kings College London attended our Standing up for Science Media workshop on 17th June 2011 at the Linnean Society. Here she shares some insights and thoughts she took away from the day.

In recent years, scientists have often voiced concerns about the ways in which the media misrepresents scientific evidence and have colloquially termed this misrepresentation ‘bad science’. Bad science can take many forms including presenting early indicative findings as truth, omitting caveats and limitations of the study, making generalisations and claims well beyond the scope of the study and presenting misleading headlines that do not reflect the complete picture. With the public likely to make decisions based on these stories, there is a need for responsible and accurate reporting to help the public make well-informed choices.

Whose responsibility is it to stand up for good science reporting in media outlets? A workshop held by the charity ‘Sense about Science’ gave young scientists like me the chance to hear from both sides of the scientific communication ‘divide’: scientists with experience of speaking to the press and science correspondents. Turns out both are committed to good science!

So then where does the divide lie? Why do so many stories reach the press presenting evidence in a biased, headline-grabbing way, and where does the responsibility lie?

Editors and journalists often get blamed (perhaps unfairly?) for sacrificing scientific rigour at the altar of the business model of sales. However, their job is to ensure that deadlines are met and readership remains high, which may make it difficult for them to achieve balance. Do the press always recognize the implications of generalising, removing caveats, assuming causality when only correlations have been proved etc.?

How about the responsibility of scientists to present findings without sacrificing key scientific rigour? Scientists, by nature of their training, are primed to seek out alternative theories, approaches and keep a balanced mind about limitations of their studies. Do we need to be better at making our findings punchier and more accessible?

Clearly the pressures on both scientists as well as science correspondents are high, and disparate. Press officers can help to liaise between scientists and journalists, as they recognize some of the constraints that science correspondents and editors work under, and will help scientists to communicate their findings.

More young scientists should be regularly trained, encouraged and supported to participate in public debate to make their voices heard and to stand up for the presentation of good science. The one thing I can envisage holding us back from doing so is a lack of confidence as well as lack of experience in this area. Perhaps more widespread training would encourage young scientists to see it to be just as important to participate in public debate, as it is to adhere to methodological rigour. This workshop made me consider the ways in which I ought to engage to make my voice more noticeable, not just in presenting my science well, but also to speak out against badly reported science. This can be by starting small – such as blogging, leaving comments under an online news article, or writing to an editor. Ultimately, our efforts will hopefully result in a better informed public, which should remain the primary aim of publicly-funded scientific research.

The next Standing up for Science media workshop will be held on November 18th 2011 at the University of Glasgow. For more information, contact Rose Wu rwu@senseaboutscience.org