“Be in charge of the story from the beginning”, advised Dr Robin Lovell-Badge, speaking at the recent Voice of Young Science (VoYS) ‘Standing up for Science’ media workshop. Our research = Our story so it’s essential that we get our story across despite the questions being asked be journalists. Head of the Division of Stem Cell Biology and Developmental Genetics at the Francis Crick Institute, Robin related personal anecdotes from his encounters with the media which span all spectrums of good and bad; from councils supporting his work, to be likened to a nazi doctor!

Speaking to the media can be a very daunting task, especially for scientists. A multitude of questions such as “What’s the journalist’s angle? How will the public perceive my story? What if I am misquoted?” can race through the mind of a scientist as they try to imagine every possible scenario (the good, the bad and ugly) that can occur. Such apprehension of public perception could dictate to what extent scientists communicate their science. Other factors include:

1. Finding the time to balance lab experiments with science communication
2. Working in a “news worthy” field
3. Having the appropriate training to engage with the media

With public engagement being essential, and a responsibility for scientists globally, organisations and charities such as Sense About Science provide training workshops that encourage early career researchers to get their voices heard in public debates about science. I was fortunate enough to attend one of these workshops through the Society for Experimental Biology (one of its sponsors) in the form of the Voice of Young Science (VoYS) ‘Standing up for Science’ media workshop. It tackles the aforementioned issues, primarily placing emphasis on how PhD students and early career researchers can actively contribute to public engagement, despite the various fears and barriers that may present themselves.

Following on from the initial discussions about the changing image and role of science and scientists in the public domain, the discussion moved to what journalists are looking for. With an emphasis on finding the balance between the need for
entertainment and reporting science and evidence in a way that is not misrepresented, Claire Coleman, a freelance journalist, highlighted an important point: the story isn’t necessarily what the scientist thinks it is and it’s paramount that the scientist and journalist are both on the same page.

The last session focused on the nuts and bolts of standing up for science. Michael Stacey, Press Officer at Nature, and Hayley Gorton, a VoYS representative, offered practical guidance and ways that early career researchers can get their voices heard. These included: presenting at science festivals, becoming a STEM ambassador and writing blogs/making podcasts.

Integrated into the day were interactive group activities that enabled the attendees to address the good and bad ways the media reports science. Recurring points from all groups included:

The good:

- Simplifies the concept, making it more palatable for the public
- Journalists can engage with scientists in a way that makes them relatable
- Helps justify government funding; public support means more funding

The bad:

- Exaggeration/non-factual information
- Headline does not match actual article; ploy to attract readers
- Use of numbers/figures that the public cannot interpret correctly

From the discussions, we concluded that the media isn’t all bad! Scientists can use this platform to successfully engage with the public and raise scientific awareness. With education being a major focus in government, scientists can do their part to encourage the next generation of young budding scientists to be scientifically curious, search for evidence and ultimately consider a scientific career.

"Be in charge of the story from the beginning"

More information can be found at:
http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/workshops.html