The much-maligned journalist and I...

Calum Waterson, a PhD student in Chemistry at the University of Edinburgh, attended the recent Standing up for Science media workshop held at the University of Manchester on 15th March 2013.

Friday 15th March found me in Manchester, slightly bleary after a night rudely interrupted by the bar across the street from my hotel, and sitting in a room full of scientists. The event, the Voice of Young Science media workshop, had been hotly anticipated as both a training opportunity and a Friday break from my current research.

While most of the work I’m engaged in is heavily bound in intellectual property agreements, the challenge of getting something complex over to a non-specialist audience has been an interest of mine ever since I first tried to explain what I did to my mother. Most PhD students will have experienced this; you head home for Christmas or some other family gathering and people will hit you with the inevitable question, “so what do you actually do?”

Well, after stumbling through some poorly considered metaphors and waving my hands for ten minutes, I could see my mother was proud that I was doing something clever and that I wasn’t on the streets; but I feared she still had nothing but the vaguest of ideas about what it was I actually doing.

This was my first experience with the frustration that comes from trying to walk the line between oversimplified (with the accompanying offense) and overly technical (with the accompanying rabbit-in-the-headlights-I-wish-I’d-never-asked look) descriptions of our field.

Tales of incidents like this at a personal level can be annoying, but when we pan out to society as a whole it can become a real problem: how do scientists explain, clearly and succinctly, what they’ve achieved to the public? Also, in the void of understanding left by poor communication, how do we prevent our story becoming the next cure for cancer? We can rail ineffectively against a whole host of factors that make the general public unreceptive to truly astounding scientific discoveries: the stereotyped portrayal of scientists as the socially awkward super-geek, the lack of understanding of the scientific method, the image of scientists ‘playing god’ with contentious issues such as cloning and animal testing, and even a complete lack of public interest among a host of other issues. However, with a media that sometimes seems to trivialise science into how close we are to landing on Mars or the cure for HIV/AIDS, how do we get our point across? So, I find myself in a classroom in the University of Manchester, confronted by a panel of Scientists.

The workshop itself, run by the charity Sense About Science as part of the Voice of Young Science (VoYS) programme, purports to “encourage early career researchers to get their voices heard in public debates about science. During the workshops we discuss concerns about speaking to the public and confront misconceptions about how the media works.” With these points firmly in mind, we jumped straight into the itinerary for the day.

The first session, focussing on anecdotal tales of both positive and negative media experiences from some firmly established scientists, warned us of a number of pitfalls when dealing with the media. Professor Matthew Cobb (University of Manchester) related tales of working with the production team behind Wonders of Life, the BBC’s recent Brian Cox adventure through the physics and biology of life, and also of being left embarrassed by his granddaughter when she called him on a particularly cringeworthy piece of documentary comparing T. Rex to dogs. On the topic of dogs, Dr. Susanne
Schultz (University of Manchester) opened with a story about how comparing the brain sizes of more-social dogs with less-social cats, plus some opportunistic journalistic intervention, had led to her name on a piece declaring dogs to be smarter than cats. This, of course, immediately led to written venom from the nations’ cat owners, including examples of how smart their cat really was and how dare she suggest otherwise!? While humorous, there was an overriding message about media engagement from this session, summed up and (regrettably) paraphrased from Professor Cobb: try it, even if it goes badly, it’s a good learning experience.

The first of the afternoon sessions was, in a sense, why we were there. It’s all very well hearing from scientists about science in the media, but it won’t teach you much about what happens to your story after it leaves your hands. To help us with this we were presented with a panel of Journalists: David Derbyshire, freelance environmental and science print journalist, Rebekah Erlam, broadcast journalist with Radio 5 live, and Morwenna Grills, media relations officer for the University of Manchester and former TV journalist. The initial impression in the difference between scientist and journalist was striking. Our panel were all extremely smart and well presented, with the occasional blinding smile. Looking around the room, while there were one or two suits in attendance, it was apparent that the scientifically minded amongst us had dressed up to attend (I choose my words carefully here, not wishing to offend those in the audience for whom dapper is daily), whereas the journalists looked as though this smartness was their standard fare. An early example of how the image you present is extremely important.

Impressions aside, here they were! The people responsible for all those ridiculous cancer/Alzheimers/HIV cure stories, the people obscuring the meaning of science to the world! Right? Wrong. The pictures painted by our panel were frank: most journalists fight hard to maintain the integrity of stories and most of the ‘sexing up’ is done in an attempt to attract readers to what the general public would probably never read if merely presented with the research title. Concessions were made that lazy journalism combined with unclear press releases can lead to errors, sometimes even gross errors, but that the rate of these are generally low. It was heavily hinted that science writers do have an extremely good understanding of science in general and, while they may not be experts in our area, they have a vested interest in getting the story right.

The crowd relaxed, pitchforks and stakes were packed away and we started to engage in some serious media relations training. Advice was passed on how to write concisely and effectively (advice I hope this piece is following!) with one suggestion that George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language” essay, despite being over sixty years old, is still very much valid today. Recommendations on the best time to get in touch with various types of journalist (print, TV and radio) to have the best chance of publication. Even some do’s and don’ts (don’t book a holiday for the day after you make the press release!). The Q&A session confronted some misconceptions and fears, even occasionally straying into the realm of asking advice on improving ourselves. All in all, it was an extremely informative session.

The final panel consisted of Dr. Chris Peters and Victoria Murphy, of Sense About Science, and Sarah Blackford, head of education and public affairs at the Society for Experimental Biology. This session focussed mostly on the role of learned societies and social media in the continued fight to improve the public perception of science. I will say little about this session, partly to retain the surprise for future workshop participants, and partly to limit my already lengthy word count. The session did inspire me to join Twitter!
So, how to sum up the lessons learned from an educational day? I’d guess that my major transition came in a shift of opinion about the press in general. It’s very easy to see the press as a disembodied, slightly shifty entity that will say anything to sell papers/get viewers; and the number of postgraduates whose supervisors didn’t know they were at the workshop (and would disapprove if they did), attests to how widely held this view might be.

The picture we were presented is a very different one. Scientists and science journalists are two ends of a spectrum of available time and public demand (I’d imagine that documentary makers somewhere sit in the middle). Scientists spend many years on a particular subject and are deeply passionate about it. Science journalists are passionate about science, but have little time to produce content due to tight deadlines. There are, of course, scoundrels who will attempt to manipulate for their own gain, but these people are hardly limited to either group, or even this debate. Good communication and some forethought will protect well against them. To any scientist who feels a journalist “doesn’t get it”, perhaps the words of Abraham Lincoln would suit, “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.”

The author would like to thank the kind people of Sense About Science for arranging a fantastic workshop, which (if it wasn’t clear in the text) he would highly recommend, the panellists who took time out to talk with us, and to you, if you made it all the way to the end.