

**SHORT NOTE ON THE "SHORTENING" OF SCIENTIFIC JOURNALISM**

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**In the past few years, major changes in the shape, technique, and content of science news has been seen in the Brazilian press.**

**The traditional news and features stories have been replaced by short-and-to-the point notes, and explanatory notes. While they are timely and informative, many of these stories are nothing more translightly expanded ledes a far cry from the numberless, typed pages that onced followed such introduction. Today's science journalists may produce perhaps 11 centimeters in one column: a short note.**

**FOLHA DE S. PAULO, a daily paper where I work, has noticed that the typical reader devotes less and less time to newspaper reading. Educated people devote an average of 30 minutes daily to reading of a newspaper. Most read the front page headlines and inner page titles, stopping only a little longer at news of special interest to them. As a result, the paper has shortened its texts, adopting a breezing, mor digested, style. Oddly, the paper has not reduced its total page count because of this; On the contrary: it has grown in size.**

**Another trend introduced to the Brazilian daily press by FOLHA was the significant growth in the use of "informative units". Statistics also showed that readers responded more to visual information or graphics instead of long texts. The result has been the replacement of ordinary text with information presented graphically in illustrations, boxes, maps, graphs, and tables.**

**The other three largest newspaper in Brazil, namely, O ESTADO DE S. PAULO, JORNAL DO BRASIL, and O GLOBO, began to follow this trend, although in more inconspicuous way.**

**In terms of scientific journalists, this change suggests that, to decodify science no longer means to translate science for the masses, but, rather, to digest and reduce it to a story that carries the maximum of information in the smallest size possible.**

**Of course, the ability to summarize is a characteristic of the competent journalist, particularly in the area of scientific news. A good clear, explanation dosen't need lensthy arguments and long stories are not necessary to adequately explain a scientific fact.**

Scientific journalism is not longer a separate division, or foreign body, in the daily press. Rather, science news has become one of the branches, like economics, sports, or politics. Thus, it is now a competitor for space with all other areas.

As Neil E. Miller noted in 1986, science writers must now compete for space with all other news. In this intense competition, where writers need to “publish or perish”, story with about 500 words (a little less than two, double-space typed pages, according to Miller, was typical. Today, however, the typical story is becoming just one typed page, double-spaced, or a column length of about 11 centimeters. The only way to make someone read a whole story of science today is to offer it as a short note, or “lollipop”, in the Brazilian journalists’ jargon.

There was a time when a newspaper story was considered more relevant for the space it received than for its contents. At present, however, much like what has happened in scientific publications, it’s not the length of the report that determines its worth, but how precise and original is the information of its contents. Since publications have become more and more expensive, space has become more precious, thus one cannot use such space without being relevant and get away with it.

David Pendlebury, writing in “Science” magazine, showed that 55% of all articles published in some 4,500 refereed scientific journals didn’t receive a single citation in the next five years.

While there is a great difference between scientists reading about original research in a specialized journal and the general public reading a popular report on that work in a newspaper, both groups have the common need to keep well informed and up-to-date.

The scientists needs to keep up with the advances in his specific field of work; the ordinary reader, needs, to understand better the world around him and to follow the evolution of ideas and trends that shape his life. For this exercise of continued education of the ordinary reader we can consider that the mass media are the best way to supply this need.

Timothy Egan, of THE NEW YORK TIMES, published recently the conclusions of research in the state of Oregon, USA. The study, on adult literacy programs, found that 97% of the US adult population can read and write. Nevertheless, only 8.7% of the interviewed people were able to understand a text correctly. In Brazil, 85% of the adults are below the educational standard of the developed countries.

A scientific work not cited in the specialized international literature can be considered a lost work. Likewise story published by a newspaper that is not understood by the reader is a "lost story".

In order that the ordinary readers of newspapers begin to read - and, more important to understand- the facts of science, the short notes, digested, yet complete in explanation, both informative and instructive, seem to be a new and promising opportunity.

Indeed, it is an opportunity which science journalists can successfully exploit, for the very basis of good journalism is simple clear explanations, succinctly presented and accessible to general readers. This way, the short science story published in the daily paper will be not only understood, but the basic information will be kept in the reader's mind.

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