

"THE HIDDEN PERSUADERS: INSTITUTIONAL SPOKESPERSONS AND
THE IMAGE OF SCIENCE"

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THE HIDDEN PERSUADERS: Institutional Spokespersons and the Image of Science

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Abstract

For more than half-century in the United States, and more recently in Europe and elsewhere, science information specialists, the "official spokespersons" for research organizations, government laboratories, and academic institutions have played significant roles in determining the flow of news and information to the general public. Translating and interpreting research results from institutional laboratories and then transmitting "official" messages to the media, these people often serve as the first "gatekeepers" in a complex communications network. Despite their critical contribution to public understanding of science and technology, information specialists have been generally ignored by communications scholars. In part, this is because both scientists and journalists tend to minimize their importance. Reporters often accuse them of blatant propagandizing--or of blocking access to primary sources. Many scientists, in turn, dismiss them as unimaginative functionaries, fit only to fulfill necessary public relations requirements or to serve as shields against an inquisitive press. This paper will attempt to assess the real influence wielded by information officers and to examine the supportive services they provide both researchers and reporters. This subject will become increasingly important as many major European research institutions, such as ESA and CSIC, develop proactive programs of public information based on the American model.

Introduction

Several years ago, while addressing an international conference on astronomy education in Paris, I made the somewhat sweeping statement that, in the mid-1960s, the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory became the first observatory in the world to appoint a science information specialist and, indeed, I was that very person.

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Modesty and restraint, obviously, are not among the traits of successful public relations practitioners.

Immediately, however, I was attacked by an outraged French astronomer. She accused me of ignoring the historical record, defaming the field of astronomy, and insulting the entire French scientific community. She then lectured me about Camille Flammarion, the former director of the Paris Observatory, who had made his professional facility accessible to amateurs and had written the first major popular astronomy book for the public a century earlier.

She was right, of course. But, unfortunately, she also had completely missed my point.

Many great scientists of the past, especially astronomers such as Flammarion, were also great popularizers. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the best known scientists are often very effective public communicators.

What I was trying to express, by my own example, was the modern phenomenon of hiring non-scientists to serve as spokespersons for science.

The Rise of the Information Class

The professional public information specialist for science first appeared in the United States at the end of World War II, paralleling the growth of government funding for research and development in both federal laboratories and private universities.

Originally, the role of information specialists was straightforward: to provide accountability. In other words, to explain how public tax monies were being spent. And, in the efficient and economical way of American society at that time, it made sense to hire professional communicators to do the explaining, thereby freeing scientists and engineers to do more science and technology.

However, the new scientific discoveries and technical applications that soon poured forth from these government-funded labs, coupled with the Space Race of the 1960s, created a seemingly insatiable public desire for science news. By the late 1960s, the science information specialist had assumed a broader role, providing science news for the general public, sometimes directly through university or agency-produced newsletters, magazines, and broadcast programs, but, more often, indirectly, via a two-step communication process through the commercial mass media.

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Of course, even in the United States there is only a finite amount of money available for basic research. By the early 1970s, as the Space Race slowed to a crawl and a combination of unwise entanglements abroad and intractable social problems at home sapped the Federal budget, competition increased for the dwindling pool of R&D money. Clever research administrators realized that good publicity could result in Congressional support for new projects.

Thus, it was no longer enough just to explain research results. Scientific progress was packaged, polished, and made palatable to the largest possible audience--and preferably one that included decision-makers such as Senators and Congressmen. The science information specialist became a public relations expert, charged with getting "good press" for an organization's projects and people.

By the early 1980s, nearly half of the members of the National Association of Science Writers in the United States were listed as "associates," that is, public information practitioners, or information providers, as opposed to "active" members, that is, working journalists, or information gatherers. This growing percentage of information specialists among the NASW membership reflected both the new importance many organizations gave to communications and the resultant increase in practitioners nationwide.

Not surprisingly, most science information specialists were drawn from the ranks of working journalists, attracted to public relations by the promise of better pay, more stability, and greater opportunities for education, or simply because traditional media jobs were disappearing. From the beginning, then, most information specialists shared similar backgrounds, training, experience, education, and attitudes with their counterparts in the mass media. This means most were neither formally trained nor educated in the sciences. Rather, most were liberal arts or general studies graduates; self-taught in science and technology, usually on the job, where they learned about a scientific discipline by writing about it. This common background also contributed to the unusual bond between science information providers and gatherers, one in which a need for mutual assistance often outweighs the adversary relationship between journalists and "official spokespersons" in many other fields.

(Today, the profiles of both science reporters and information specialists are changing. More and more young people are entering both professions either from backgrounds in science, or with specific training in science communication. I will not discuss this trend in detail today, but it is worth noting.)

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In a 1983 study, Carol Rogers, then head of Communications for the American Association for the Advancement of Science, or AAAS, attempted to describe the special role of "science information people" or what she called "practitioners in the middle" of the communications process.

As Rogers pointed out, the typical science information specialist for a large, modern research organization performed many functions. I know this all too well. For example, I serve variously--sometimes all in the same day--as writer, editor, film maker, radio broadcaster, media expert, communications guru, spokesperson, and teacher, as well as, thanks to personal computers, graphics designer, typesetter, artist, and publisher. However, no matter how many tasks one might perform, the information specialist has three major roles: advisor, communicator, and mediator.

Information People as Advisors

Most information specialists spend considerable time in an advisory role, whether it be providing advice to top management on the possible public reaction to policy decisions or helping an individual scientist decide how to announce a new discovery.

In just the last month, I have joined discussions concerning the observatory's construction of new building, a move that could cause considerable rancor among neighborhood residents unless some conciliatory action is taken in advance; and, I have worked with a solar x-ray astronomer to develop a strategy for publicizing his observing campaign during the July solar eclipse that will give full credit to his international partners.

As advisors, information specialists must not only be familiar with their own institutions, they must be knowledgeable of media and public trends, and fully aware of current developments in the broader scientific community. Effectiveness naturally depends on one's access to the major scientific and management personnel in an organization, including the director. But, this role can also be fraught with tension, since it may mean openly opposing organizational policies that could produce negative public reaction, and being responsible for announcements of bad news as well as good.

A more benign--and more rewarding--advisory function is the informal training of scientists and engineers in techniques of press relations. Many major organizations, including the American Physical Society and American Chemical Society, produce manuals on press relations for scientists. And the Smithsonian provides seminars for apprehensive scientists on how to talk to the press, complete with mock press conferences and video interviews.

Information People as Communicators

Of course, many information specialists are pure "communicators," who serve as the equivalent of science journalists within their own organizations. While some produce news and feature releases for distribution to members of the press, others produce magazines, newspapers, and even television shows that go directly to the general public. Smithsonian magazine, for example, has over 2 million readers and carries not only the same sort of stories one might see in L'Express or Paris Match, but also the same kind of advertising. The McDonald Observatory at the University of Texas produces "Stardate," an astronomy show broadcast by scores of radio stations in the United States. The National Science Foundation publishes Mosaic, a sophisticated magazine featuring popular reports on its funded projects written entirely by freelance journalists. An example closer to this podium is the newspaper supplement A Ciencia Cierta produced by CSIC and distributed free to media in Spain.

"The communicator role poses particular challenges for science information professionals," says Rogers. "When the primary audience is the general public, they are [no longer] 'practitioners in the middle,' but are actually journalists. Their duties are the same and they require the same standards. [However, while they may not be identified] to the public as advocates for their organizations, [they still] have a relationship to those organizations that is impossible to ignore."

Information People as Mediators

The third role played by science information specialists is mediator, that is, facilitator, or liaison between scientists and the media. By maintaining press contacts, preparing and distributing press releases, arranging news conferences, and undertaking other tasks that facilitate the flow of information from science to public via the media, the information specialist serves as a vital, even if largely invisible, link in the science popularization process.

Indeed, this is the information specialist's most familiar role. It can also be the most problematic--and controversial. According to Rogers, the problem arises when the mediator's duties "include restricting access to scientists...either because the scientists do not want to talk to the press, or because an institution has policies that limit such interaction."

Even more controversial is their function as "gatekeeper" along the path of science information. "To some extent," Rogers notes, "all information specialists guide the media to scientific research--

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where it is, who's doing it, why and how it's important." This means that information specialists are often sales and marketing managers, consciously controlling and directly determining the release of scientific results.

Even in its most benign form, critics complain that information professionals, particularly those in charge of media relations at large meetings, can determine what is "news" simply by choosing what papers to make available and which scientists will appear at press conferences. In a 1980 study, Sharon Dunwoody of the University of Wisconsin showed that the majority of stories published about the annual AAAS meeting resulted from press briefings planned by the AAAS itself.

Ignoring the Obvious

Despite their central role in the communication process, their potential influence over the media, and their contribution to the public understanding of science and technology, institutional spokespersons for science have been virtually ignored by communications scholars.

In part, this is because both scientists and journalists tend to minimize the role of information specialists. Reporters often accuse them of blatant propagandizing --or of blocking access to primary sources. And, no matter that the science news "gatherers" have so much in common with science news "providers," journalists still disparage information colleagues as "flacks" and "tub-thumpers," derogatory American slang terms suggesting the mindless mouthing of other peoples' ideas and opinions.

In turn, many scientists dismiss information specialists--including those who work for them--as unimaginative functionaries, fit only to fulfill the necessary public information requirements of government contracts.

Carol Rogers attributes these attitudes to a mixture of pride and ignorance: "Some journalists feel their sense of independence is compromised if they admit to getting story ideas from an information person rather than originating the ideas themselves... [And] scientists typically do not know how science gets communicated and have no idea what the science information person in their organization does. When a reporter calls them, they seldom think the impetus might have come from the science information officer."

Please note that Rogers wrote these words in 1983. As I have stressed here, little new research has been done on the role of

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information specialists since then. It is obviously a subject ripe for some bright young doctoral candidate.

Certainly the timing is good. The research budget crisis in the United States and Great Britain means increased competition for limited funds; and, in the past, this has meant heightened public relations efforts by universities and research institutions. It is a perfect time to survey the process at its most frenzied.

In addition, there seems to be some subtle shift in the attitudes of science journalists. Or, at least some new honesty! A survey of the U.S. National Association of Science Writers conducted last summer revealed that "two-thirds of the journalists rely on public information and public relations officers for help with breaking stories. Even more find publicists useful for story ideas." This is an unusually open endorsement of the otherwise "hidden persuaders" of science.

Finally, today, throughout Europe and, to a certain extent, in parts of Latin America and East Asia, many large, research organizations are beginning to emulate the American model by establishing proactive public information programs. Three examples of highly visible, quite imaginative, and very effective public relations operations are those of the European Space Agency (ESA) in Paris, the European Southern Observatory (ESO) in Munich, and, of course, the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas (CSIC), our host here in Madrid.

While many commercial research facilities, such as Phillips and Sandoz, have conducted such programs for years, the emergence of non-profit organizations as information providers is a new phenomena. Even as late as 1986, Françoise Harrois-Monin of L'Express, speaking at an International Science Writers Association seminar, could complain about the lack of good scientific public relations in Europe. By contrast with the wealth of press releases she received from US-based scientific organizations, she noted: "I don't know of any French universities or research centers--even CNRS--which send press releases to U.S. journalists. Worse yet, most French universities have no public relations office. In Europe, we are simply not public relations oriented."

Five years later, the changes are coming fast, but they are still recent enough to allow scholars to trace this communications revolution back to its inception. I hope the next time this group meets, I can hear someone describe the birth pangs of PR at ESA, CSIC, or ESO.

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A Cautionary Note

However, before one becomes too enthused over the contributions of information specialists to the image of science, I will end with a cautionary tale.

About 15 years ago, just after the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory merged with the Harvard College Observatory to form the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, the world's largest astronomy research center, I received a call from a young reporter at the Harvard Crimson. The Crimson is a daily newspaper published by students of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Independent, iconoclastic, and somewhat quirky, the Crimson has been the spawning ground for some of America's best-known journalists--and it has a reputation for trying to discredit the university whenever possible.

The reporter who called, and it was not his first query, was convinced that something untoward had resulted from the joining of these two great organizations--the federally funded Smithsonian Institution and the privately endowed Harvard University. Some scientists must have paid off! Some administrators--perhaps, even me--were getting graft!

While his premise was laughable, his persistence was a great annoyance. Finally I lost my temper. "This is stupid," I said. "Why don't you cover a real story? Write about important science, not imaginary chicanery." I scanned a list of scientific events--talks, seminars, colloquia--to find the most esoteric subject imaginable, and suggested that he attend, that afternoon, a seminar entitled "A New Value for H_0 ." H_0 is the Hubble Constant--or the age and size of the universe--and discussions of it usually put me to sleep.

The young reporter agreed to attend and I hung up the phone convinced I would never hear from him again.

The next morning on the way to work I picked up the Boston Globe. There, on the front page, was a big Associated Press wire story: "New Age of the Universe Determined by Smithsonian Astronomer: Cosmos only half as old as previously believed." To my amazement, the story was based on the seminar the day before--the same one to which I had sent the Crimson writer.

I called the scientist and he confirmed that the story was correct. In fact, he was a quite pleased, since this was the first public announcement of some new observations suggesting the universe might be only 10 billion rather than 20 billion years old.

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What happened? The Crimson reporter attended the seminar, interviewed the astronomer afterwards, wrote his story for the school paper--and then faxed a copy to the Associated Press in Boston. The wire service science editor, impressed with the piece, distributed it nationwide. Indeed, almost every paper in the country carried the news the next day that the universe might be younger than previously estimated. The story also made the national television network news. And, even America's best-known comedian, Johnny Carson, worked a joke about the "adolescent universe" into his late night television show.

In short, the story was widespread, the observatory got great publicity, the scientist won instant recognition, the young reporter had a great start on a career---and scores of friends called to congratulate me on my brilliant public relations coup! Of course, I never told anyone that my PR success was really the result of an attempt to avoid adverse publicity--and to discourage a pesky reporter!

There is a moral to this story. One that both scholars and practitioners of scientific popularization should consider seriously: Good science that addresses questions of real importance to humanity needs no help in publicity. Honest research, solid data, and interesting results will find its own audience without any help from professional communicators.

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