Parallel Session 14: Science in daily press; a cultural question?

INTERPRETING SCIENCE NEWS: MEDIA TEMPLATES AND SCIENTIFIC CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract

Reception studies of news media coverage of science are interesting for science communication researchers because science news is a key site for disseminating newly-published scientific information. This paper briefly considers some of the results from 32 focus group interviews that examined how participants interpreted news reporting of a range of scientific issues. The results indicate that participants remembered key events in the coverage, that they were media literate and that they had well-formed opinions regarding these scientific issues. In conclusion, the paper considers the relationship between the (re)construction of media templates of science and scientific citizenship.

Key words: Communication, Media and Public Opinion

Text

Context

The research discussed in this paper is situated within debates about media templates and scientific citizenship. Starting from the premise that audiences are heterogeneous and that audience members are active (de Cheveigné and Véron, 1996), this research is informed by Kitzinger's (2000) discussion of media templates. She argues that:

> Media templates are a crucial site of media power, acting to provide context for new events, serving as foci for new demands for policy change and helping to shape the ways in which we make sense of the world. [In this way media templates act as] rhetorical shorthand, helping journalists and audiences to make sense of fresh news stories. (Ibid. p. 81, 61)

Moreover, this paper starts from the premise that audience members will interpret and contextualise media reporting in terms of their prior knowledge, experiences, attitudes and beliefs; in other words, in terms of their scientific citizenship (see Irwin and Michael (2003) for discussion).

Objective

The key objective is to investigate the relationship between media templates for news reporting of newly-published science and scientific citizenship.

Methods

Thirty-two focus groups were conducted to investigate how participants interpreted and contextualised news media coverage of four scientific issues: the cloning of sheep (Holliman, 2004); whether analysis of a meteorite provided evidence of ancient bacterial life-forms that could demonstrate primitive life had once existed on Mars (Holliman, 1999); Gulf War syndrome (Holliman, 2000); and genetic explanations for intelligence and sexuality.

The groups were drawn from a structured sample of pre-existing groups so that participants could discuss these issues in a relaxing and supportive environment (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). Groups were chosen to reflect those who were perceived to have a particular interest in the scientific issue for discussion (e.g. scientists, or trainee journalists) and those without a perceived interest (e.g. office workers).

Data collection involved quantitative and qualitative methods, including individually completed pre- and post-group questionnaires, a group activity where participants produced news artefacts using stimulus materials derived from content analyses of the scientific issues under consideration, and a general discussion led by the group moderator (see Holliman, in press for a description of methods). The group activity and discussion were tape recorded and transcribed, and field notes were taken to record the use of stimulus materials and non-verbal communication.

Results

The results discussed here examine the group interaction during the production of the news artefacts and the discussion that followed. These results suggest that, when compared to analyses of production and content for the same scientific issues (e.g., see Holliman, 2000), the groups' news artefacts represented similar language and visuals, and key events and framing.

Participants were media literate and capable of reproducing, but also critically evaluating media templates for these issues. For example, following the production of their news artefacts, which reflected key issues from the actual coverage, participants often challenged both these artefacts and media reporting. In effect, these participants demonstrated awareness of the socially constructed nature of science news, drawing on their prior knowledge, experience, attitudes and beliefs of both science and the media to support their arguments.

Conclusions

The experiences of conducting focus groups discussed in this paper have investigated the relationship between media templates for a range of scientific

issues and the (re)construction of scientific citizenship. In conclusion, the results suggest that participants were critical consumers of media templates for science. These participants had a reflexive understanding of the media templates for these scientific issues that both drew on and informed their scientific citizenship.

In reflecting on the topic of 'science in the daily press: a cultural question', science communication researchers can explore the diversity in how audience members come to make sense of science reporting in the context of their everyday lives. In so doing, researchers should consider how audience members interpret and contextualise both science *and* the media. Ideas about media templates and scientific citizenship could be useful concepts in this respect, facilitating systematic research into these issues.

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