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## A matter of trust . . .

Posted on July 14th, 2008 by earle holland

The culture of science and the culture of journalism are remarkable similar. Both seek answers. Both look for facts, and both struggle to explain the machinations of our world and society.

You'd think that both communities would revel in their affinities, but they don't!



All too many scientists distrust the media, believing that journalists' need to simplify can only misinterpret the subtlety of their research. Journalists, on the other hand, often think that scientists, immersed in their abstract and esoteric studies, fail to see the relevance that most people need in their news.

In truth, both views are skewed and inaccurate, but they have been firmly embedded in the folklore surrounding interactions between journalists and researchers. And that gives most dialogues between journalist and scientist an edge of uncertainty.

Those of us on research university campuses who interpret the science and explain it to the news media know the actual frailty of this folklore, but the hesitance of young researchers to interact with journalists still is influenced by elders in their field whose encounters with reporters were less than successful.

A new [study published last week](#) in the journal *Science* adds data to the discussion. A group of researchers from the five leading R&D countries – United States, Japan, Germany, United Kingdom and France – now say their research shows these meetings of journalists and scientists are “more frequent and go more smoothly than was previously thought.”

They surveyed more than 1,300 scientists from the five countries who had recently published in peer-reviewed journals and asked a bevy of questions about their subsequent interviews with reporters. All had been contacted by journalists at least once regarding their work, and some experienced up to five such calls.

One interesting finding was that nine out of 10 of the surveyed researchers seemed altruistic in their reasoning for talking to the news media. They said

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doing so "increased public appreciation of science," promoted a "more positive attitude toward research" and fostered a "better-educated general public."

At the center of these relationships rests questions of trust. Can the journalist trust the scientist to explain clearly and simply what people need to know? And can the scientist trust the journalist to include the precision, context and accuracy that science requires?

The new study suggests the answer to both is yes, and that's a good thing for both camps, as well as for the public.

But with trust in the balance, an **ABC News** medical producer who had an advance, embargoed copy of the study from the journal emailed a large list of information officers at American medical centers, citing the study and arguing that it supported more open communications between reporters and their medical researchers.

His actions in breaking *Science's* embargo on the content and sharing it a day before publication violates that trust and should make those who received his message wary.

Some things change . . . some things don't. \_\_Earle Holland

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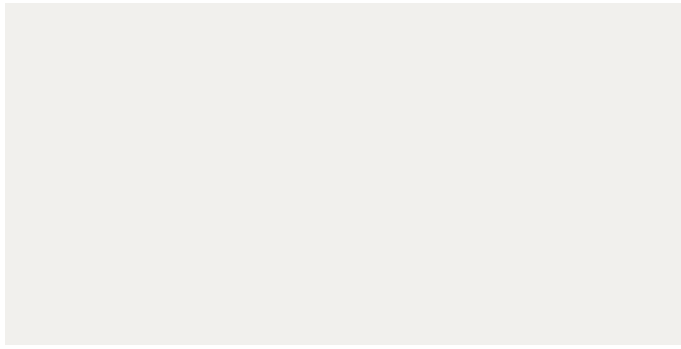
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