On Research...

Blogging about research issues at Ohio State University

Data versus Dinner . . .

Posted on May 29th, 2008 by earleholland

David Corcoran readily admits that he's not like some past *New York Times'* staffers who visited Ohio State in the last couple of years. "I don't have the 'chops' that Cory and Andy have in the world of science reporting," he said.

He was referring to the specialization of Cornelia Dean, the *Times'* first woman science editor, and Andrew Revkin, the newspaper's acclaimed environmental reporter, both of whom are considered among the best in their fields.

It's odd both that Corcoran would actually voice that, and that it might be true.

Corcoran serves as deputy science editor at perhaps the world's most prestigious newspaper. He also does restaurant reviews.

The obvious question is what business does a restaurant critic have managing science coverage for one of the most influential news agencies in the world? Besides say, food science, how can he judge research?

And therein lies the quandary that's puzzled researchers and journalists alike for more than half a century: How much expertise in science does a journalist need to report on the field? Moreover, what does the public need to know to "understand" science?

The evolution of science journalism grew from the "gee whiz" reporting of the Cold War era, to the fear and blame of the environmental movement, to present concerns over potential conflicts of interest and inappropriate governmental or industrial influence and control over scientists and the work they do.

And in lockstep with that transition have come two societal changes – an exponential growth in the amount of information confronting the citizenry, and a rapidly shrinking, collective attention span among the public.

As science becomes more complex, readers' willingness to understand it is waning. The public wants — no, demands — quick, simple answers – something that science rarely offers.

Which brings us back to why David Corcoran's role is even more important now. What he considers his weakness in facing science news is actually an advantage for the vast majority of the public. His interest in, and questions about, modern science more closely match those of the general population. Speaking on campus this week, he explained:

"The great thing about journalism is that you have to be a generalist because you're trying to explain difficult, complicated, controversial subjects to an audience of generalists. The *Times* has, we think, an educated, very

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sophisticated readership, but not all those people are scientists. They can't be expected to understand complex subjects without the help of generalists who help them navigate."

Corcoran's role as a generalist allows him to chart a reasonable course for his readers. And wise scientists see a real advantage in helping him draw the map.__*Earle Holland*

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2 Responses to "Data versus Dinner . . ."

Robert Killoren // Jun 2, 2008 at 6:30 pm

I agree that a reporter being a scientific novice can be beneficial in writing for the general public. The thing I worry about is the fact that he is used to writing as a "critic." Opinions are fine when reporting on culinary experiences, but not when reporting on science. One bad trend that I've seen is science writers becoming advocates for specific theories or technologies. For journalists, there's always the temptation to be more than a "reporter." However, multimedia journalism, more and more, is becoming a world of "spin." Unfortunately, I don't think that science writing is immune from all that. How does the profession police itself? I shudder with horror at all the articles that predicted the end of our energy problems with the discovery of cold fusion.

earleholland // Jun 2, 2008 at 9:17 pm

Interesting points, Bob. Rest assured that Corcoran understands the different roles of critic and science writer. He's widely respected for that. The trend you mention actually applies to journalists who aren't regular science writers. Few of them embrace advocacy about what they report. The only exception to that is with some environmental reporters who believe advocacy is part of their job — which it isn't! What's important is to avoid the "spin" you mention when it comes to science and research. Actually, the science writing profession does a pretty good job of self-policing. Remember that it was the university and the researchers who posed a press conference to announce cold fusion success — something that most science writers were skeptical of from the start. When institutions and scientists make false claims, there's not much that journalists can do to stop it in the short term. — EMH

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