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These are the Times . . .

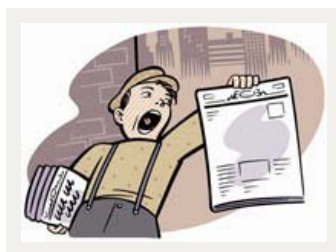
Posted on September 21st, 2010 by earleholland

The public — however you might define them — has grown more and more comfortable disbelieving what research tells them. The more complicated the science, and the more convoluted the caveats, the more willing many people are to pooh-pooh what scientists say.

And even science writers, whose bread is buttered with their confidence in research and those who do it, will discount findings that simply don't seem to fit.

(For example, research published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* showed that weather changes don't increase arthritis pain — tell that to my aching joints just before an atmospheric front moves through.)

Regardless of this tendency to disbelief, when asked, the public says it holds science and scientists in high regard. According to a study last year by the [Pew Research Center for the People and the Press](#), four out of five Americans think “science has benefited society and has helped make life easier for most people.” And seven in 10 of our citizens believe scientists “contribute a lot to the well-being of society,” a ranking only exceeded by members of the military and teachers.



Much of this respect is arguably traceable back to the value that the populace places on the outcomes of science, what researchers discover from their studies that improves our lives.

But now comes research that could weaken this argument and might potentially affect the credibility of science in the long-run.

Researchers at the [University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign](#) reported that a study of 60 years of reporting in the *New York Times* suggests that university scientists are valued more now as commentators on issues than they are as innovators of progress.

The study showed that now, 85 percent of the stories published in the *Times* “cite high-stature faculty for soundbite commentary on current events,” and only 15 percent of the stories are about the university itself or its research.

In 1946, the scholars said, more than half (53 percent) of the stories in the *Times* mentioning a research university were about the institution or its research.

The risk here is that institutions reviewing the

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study's findings may conclude that serving up faculty experts through soundbites to a hungry news media would be more beneficial than fuller reporting on the institution's research. And in truth, from an economy of effort standpoint, that logic holds some merit. Doing so would take less work.



A research university's greatest asset has always been the expertise of its faculty, the knowledge that its researchers produce through their science and scholarship. So tapping that resource is an obvious tactic for institutions wanting to garner attention for their work.

As long as that commentator role is only part of the package and not the whole, that is.

The tidal wave that has swept the journalism profession in the last decade has laid off thousands of journalists in the nation's newsrooms, shrunk the collective "newshole" – the space available for news to appear in print or through broadcasts – and pushed a trend among the conventional news media to focus more emotion than fact.

And while science is still a popular topic among readers of the news media, it is easier for reporters to cover sports, entertainment or politics than it is to report on research. Those topics are simply less complicated. So the coverage of science in the news media, while constant, still is a fraction of the whole, and some would say more "lightweight" than the reporting of the past.

The Urbana-Champaign study is interesting for what it is – an indication of the change in how the news media perceive universities, higher education and science over the last six decades through their reporting. And the scholars who did the study readily acknowledge it has its limitations.

The fear is, however, that such studies might be seen as recipes for action by institutions vying for media attention – that providing a quote or two from a campus expert is as valuable as more in-depth reporting of that scholar's work.

Research institutions have a greater obligation to the public than simply to be a stable to house experts on issues. They are obligated to explain their work in a way that educates and informs the public, even in times when the public's interest may seem lessened. __Earle Holland



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5 Responses to "These are the Times . . ."

[John Timmer](#) // Sep 21, 2010 at 5:21 pm

I wonder how much this might have to do with the evolution of

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journalistic practice. Even in a straight science story, reporters are now expected to get comments from several experts on the research to give readers a sense of whether the results are likely to be accepted by the field. From what I could tell of the study's criteria, this would simply leave them as talking heads.

[earleholland](#) // Sep 22, 2010 at 11:47 am

One possibility, John, is that the comments from other scientists, the "sound bites," may simply be another act of false balance so that the story doesn't appear to be a single-source treatise. But if that's the case, any comment will suffice and they are simple talking heads. As a colleague said, if the comments actually add substance to the story then that's fine — but if they're just gratuitous — then it's wasting the readers' time. Thanks for the feedback!

Rachel Coker // Sep 27, 2010 at 9:59 am

It's also worth noting that the study was a review of the NY Times over this period, not the "news media" as a whole.

[earleholland](#) // Sep 27, 2010 at 10:14 am

But Rachel, since the Times is considered the top of the list among "prestige" news media, it is plausible that their behaviour is being copied throughout the rest of the media. And if common practice is any indicator, the Times' adoption of sound bites would be the most conservative of actions compared to other news media. Therefore what the study of the Times showed is behavior that is probably more prevalent throughout the rest of the news media. EH

[Jim](#) // Sep 28, 2010 at 3:14 am

John took my comment right out of my mouth.

Also, I think the reason for the shift has much to do with the inundation of news and information almost everyone is now presented with on a daily basis.

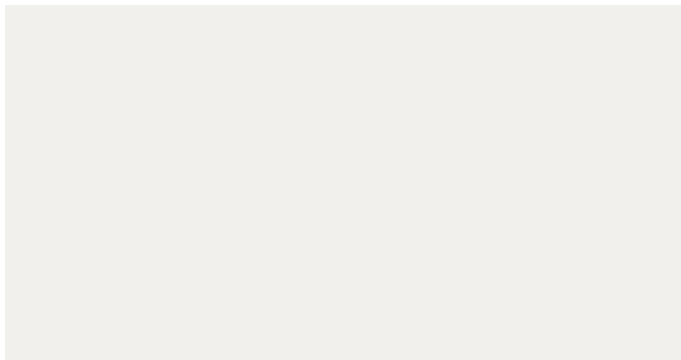
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