

The press is a foreign country

Scientists who have to speak to the media in volatile situations rarely do a brilliant job.

Robert P Crease reports on one successful encounter and suggests how best to emulate it

Scientists, I have noticed, often adopt an unscientific attitude towards the media. We all know that newspapers, TV and radio systematically transform what passes through them, while presenting the illusion of transparency. But when scientists have unfortunate encounters with journalists they frequently seem content to curse, denounce or express surprise at their treatment. The scientific approach would be to learn how the media work and how to use them for one's own purposes.

To adapt the famous first lines of L P Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*, the press is a foreign country: they do things differently there. Science and the press are separate institutions with different values and traditions. They also have different methods and grounds for seeking and justifying knowledge.

Scientists can look very different in this foreign culture than they do in their own. Behaviour that might appear as a sign of caution, concern or integrity to another scientist can be regarded as arrogant, threatening or dangerous to a non-scientist.

Evoking evocation

Communications specialists sometimes try to help scientists by teaching them "tricks" for dealing with journalists. That is a bit like using a *Berlitz* tour guide to get around; it works in a pinch. But there is a more effective, long-range and scientific way. It employs a practice—known as *evocatio*, or "evocation"—that the Roman army used to employ when conquering an enemy.

When the army came across enemy temples, it often did not simply destroy captured statues of the foreign gods. Nor did it divvy them up as spoils of war. Instead, its officers would formally "e-voke" or "call out" to the gods to ask if they wanted to go to Rome. The army would then remove the statues (presumably the answer was "yes") and take them to Rome to be incorporated into Roman religious practices.

Inevitably, foreign gods mixed identities and aspects with Roman ones. In this way, Rome found a way to incorporate practices of another tradition while keeping its own coherence and strength. Outsiders could recognize themselves in Roman culture, and Roman culture could accept them as kin.

We all know media horror stories, in which such evocation did not take place and the press made an inconsequential event involving a scientific dimension appear dangerous. (Please send me your favourites as I love to write about them.) However, one



Tough talking – dealing well with the media requires a good understanding of another culture.

example of a successful evocation took place in December 1997 at the Brookhaven National Laboratory in the US.

Early that year, a small leak of radiation-containing water had triggered a political firestorm in the wake of which the lab contractor was fired and the director stepped down. (I wrote about this episode in a previous column earlier this year, see May 2003 p19.) A new director—John Marburger, now US presidential science advisor—had been chosen and was being interviewed by a *Newsday* reporter at a local Italian restaurant. At one point the interviewer asked: "Do you believe in God?"

The question was, of course, a trap. The movie *Contact* had just been released, in which the character played by Jodie Foster is interviewed by a commission to judge if she is fit to be selected for an interstellar journey. Thrown by the very same question that Marburger was asked, Foster beats around the bush before eventually replying—reluctantly and defensively—in the negative. The answer causes the commission to decide against her, although she later gains the position after a convenient plot twist.

Marburger, however, was being asked the question in New York, not Hollywood. He knew that there would be no plot twist to the rescue should his answer prove controversial. He loaded spaghetti onto his fork, popped it into his mouth, and decided to spend a long time chewing while he thought about how to answer.

Given the chain of events that had led him to become director, Marburger realized

the danger of appearing at odds with community values. But as a former university president, he was also aware of the danger of diminishing his authority inside the institution should he pander to those values. He knew that it would have been perfectly acceptable to say something like: "That's private matter and I don't feel comfortable talking about it in public." But mindful of the urgency to convey openness and honesty, he decided to engage the question straightforwardly but carefully.

"I don't adhere to any particular organized religion," Marburger said. "I believe there are mysteries in the universe that we don't understand yet, and perhaps never will. I grew up in the context of the Methodist Church and it helped me a lot. I have nothing but affection for the church. The question of believing in God and supernatural forces is difficult for me to answer because I understand so much about physical forces in the universe and so little about human forces."

That response, which was duly printed, showed that Marburger was willing not only to field questions from reporters about the divine, but also to take the time to give a thoughtful reply. Marburger's honest answer—stating uncertainty but also a cautious inclination towards the negative—expressed respect for, and even made use of, the power and legitimacy of values that he acknowledged were not his own. His response was a brilliant example of *evocatio*, of speaking with integrity while reaching out to another culture. Marburger literally called out to its gods.

The critical point

Your integrity, reputation and welfare—and those of your profession—can depend on that foreign country. It is not easy to make oneself understood in it, which runs against the grain of a trained scientist's habits. But you cannot afford the luxury of ignoring or being shocked by that culture. The best approach is to practise evocation. Although there is no guarantee that practising evocation will produce the result you want, cultural conflicts are all but guaranteed if you do not. And if you do not care about reducing such conflicts, how can you be serious about caring for the future of your field?

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