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Lines of Communication

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The increasing impact of science on society calls for improved communication between scientists and the public via dedicated science media centers as well as nontraditional personal blogs.

The public likes science stories it can easily relate to, and we have to admit that most science, including that published in Nature Methods, is unlikely to get more than a snore from nonscientists. In contrast, science stories that have a human interest or other emotionally charged angle require the concerted efforts of both journalists and scientists to ensure that the public understands the story well enough to make an informed personal decision. A failure in this regard can lead to a crisis that is difficult to resolve. A case in point is the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccination scare when a highly reported but unjustified link to autism caused some people to stop vaccinating.

Given the increasingly important role that science has in society and public policy in many countries, and its unique capabilities for benefit or harm, one would think that media companies would be increasing their science reporting staff, but the opposite may be occurring instead. CNN just cut its entire science, technology and environment news staff; NBC Universal has cut environmental news staff, and there seems to be a trend toward using general reporters to cover all types of news.

In 2002 the UK government and science communicators responded to the need for improved science reporting by creating the nonprofit Science Media Centre (SMC). This is essentially a centralized press office that provides vetted information and scientific contacts for journalists when a big science story hits the headlines. The SMC also provides training for scientists on how to communicate with the media. The passage of the UK government's Human Fertilisation and Embryology (HFE) bill in 2008-with public support for the human-animal embryo research it allowed-has been highlighted by the SMC as evidence that getting scientists to proactively engage the media can elicit public support for even controversial research.

Other countries are jumping onboard. Australia was inspired to incorporate the Australian SMC in 2005 and New Zealand followed suit in 2008. North America should soon see its first such center when the Science Media Centre of Canada starts operations.

These regional organized efforts to improve communication between scientists and the media are laudable and important, particularly when big science stories erupt that have the potential for lasting harm if reported inaccurately. But attempts to improve public science communication should not be limited to traditional media. Nontraditional media such as blogs offer an alternative with a far larger pool of potential science communicators. Based on numbers from the US National Science Foundation, a conservative calculation indicates that the total number of science and engineering doctorates awarded in the US since 1960 will pass one million this year. Counting the number of medical doctors and people with undergraduate science degrees swells the number of scientifically savvy potential science

information consumers and communicators several-fold.

A powerful aspect of blogs is their capacity to put a human face on science and related health issues by allowing scientists to discuss how these things affect them personally in a format in which regular readers feel as though they know the writer. Analysis of the MMR vaccine incident suggests that emotional arguments like a scientist talking about vaccinating his or her own children might be more powerful than the rational arguments that form the basis of normal scientific discourse. The public's emotional response to genetically modified food in some countries might also have been very different if people could see numerous online blog entries from scientists discussing why they were not concerned about the scenarios being promulgated in the press. But can enough scientists be convinced of the potential benefits of blogging to make this a reality?