

Society of Environmental Journalists 18th Annual Conference, Roanoke, Va.
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Notes by Bob Wyss, Journalism Department, University of Connecticut

Friday Breakfast:

Making the Science Sing: A Multimedia Workshop for Journalists, Communicators and Researchers □ This breakfast session will take a case-study approach. We'll take a close-up look at a recent piece of environmental research that got heavy coverage in the press. What happened? What are the proper roles of journalists, public-relations practitioners and scientists in translating the rarified language of peer-reviewed science for mass audiences? How are those roles changing with the rise of the Internet? We'll look at all the hits and misses in the coverage of a high-profile study, and will identify lessons to guide future coverage of cutting-edge science. □ **Moderator: Dan Fagin**, Director, Science, Health and Environmental Reporting Program, New York University □ **Speakers:** □ **Sandy Bauers**, Environment Reporter, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* □ **Ben Halpern**, Project Coordinator, Ecosystem-based Management Program, National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis, University of California, Santa Barbara □ **John Nielsen**, former Environment Correspondent, National Public Radio, and Author, *Condor: To the Brink and Back – The Life and Times of One Giant Bird*.

Fagin: The goal of this session is to examine communications between journalists and scientists by looking at how one research project was presented and then covered by reporters. The project chosen was a report on Human Impacts on the Oceans that received widespread coverage after it was published in *Science* and then presented at AAAS (American Association for the Advancement of Science).

Halpern: I learned that the best way to obtain coverage of my research is to have good science, but there are times it can get coverage if it is either trendy or funny. For instance, recalled study colleague did on beer consumption that did get a lot of press.

Communications with reporters is important, and the burden is on the scientist to get the message out.

He and others on the research team spent weeks working on the roll-out of the study. There is little reward in the scientific community for that kind of effort. I'd be better off doing science than promotion, at least from the rewards standpoint.

But as a marine biologist he believes that there are times it is important to get messages out to the public. It helps to have support from others in getting the message out.

Also believed that the reputation and status of those doing the research and reporting the results helps get the story covered. Coverage was also helped because there was broad interest in the subject - the health of the oceans. Also believes that a negative story produces better coverage than a positive story. It's harder to sell a positive story. Finally, he believes that luck and timing helps too.

Research began 4 years ago when several marine biologists decided they wanted to know how many pristine places in the ocean were left, primarily to know where they could go for research. Quickly realized that to find those places they had to determine where human impacts were occurring in the ocean.

Skipped discussing the research, because that was not the point of the panel.

When they were nearing the publication date, weeks away, they began preparing. By now there was a team of more than 20 researchers who had spent a significant amount of time on the work. Knew they would be talking to people who would only be able to write 500 words or tell the story in 30 to 60 seconds.

Worked with a group called Compass (Communication Partnership for Science and the Sea www.compassonline.org) that provided guidance and help. Part of the luck that occurred was that Compass had an office just across the hall from Halpern at his offices at UCSB. They wrote the press release and organized the press conference at the AAAS Conference and trained the scientists to talk to the press. They called it Message Boxing. Learning what messages to get out. Did role playing and mock press conferences. Also developed a website which had a summary of the research, and that included links to Google Earth and video.

Coverage was phenomenal. Another reason he felt it went so well is because reporters were impressed with the amount of research that had occurred.

NPR story:

Played the NPR story that had been prepared by Neilsen, who could not attend the conference. Fagin said the element that stood out to him was that

the story cried out for maps, and that was a significant challenge for creating an audio report.

NBC telecast:

Played the Anne Thompson NBC story. It combined the ocean report with a separate report on Boston harbor. Fagin said that showed to him, one of the challenges of television, to search for a visual story they had to go out and find a story to link it too. Halpern said he had suggested the Boston harbor story to the reporter as a way to make the story more visual.

Bauers

As the science/environmental reporter at the Philadelphia Inquirer, she is part of a team called SMASH, which includes reporters covering science but health, medicine and other related issues. She said that the prestige of the researchers or the research really is not important to her. What she looks for in a story is the scope of the work, if it has a local impact, if the graphics are good to go with the story, and most importantly, it has a strong holy cow factor. We feel that if we are engaged by the story, so will many of our readers.

In this case, the holy cow factor was very high.

She did not have very much time to do the story. What she does on a story like this is after she learns about it, she throws out a wide net, and tries to contact as many scientists who would know about it as she can. For expediency, she usually does that by email. Then the calls start coming in, and she is calling people, and she tries to talk to as many people as possible.

She had the press release, but there was more than one. In fact, there were so many that she had to make a pile of them and determining the basic facts was slightly confusing. Also, many of the participants were traveling to the AAAS meeting, and it was difficult to reach many of them. Halpern was one of the last people she talked to, and he proved to be quite helpful.

She struggled with the lead and afterwards wondered what was correct. There seemed to be 2 main points: one was that only 4 percent of the world's oceans remain pristine and the second was that 40 percent have been significantly degraded. She led with the 40 percent fact and the 4 percent did not show up until the 15th graf. She did not really get very much guidance from the scientists on this issue. It seemed that every person seemed to have a new or different twist or spin.

She said some other reporters at other publications led with the 40 percent, some the 4 percent, and some tried to combine the two elements.

It was a big news day in Philadelphia, lots of competition for page 1. The story wound up on page A-2.

Q&A

Halpern, what was the better lead, the 4 percent or the 40 percent?

I don't think there is a right answer. The challenge for us was to present several compelling issues that we found from the research.

Halpern, what lessons did he learn in talking to reporters?

Learned to avoid jargon, use metaphor, give lots of examples. It took time to learn to do that.

Halpern, what was the response after the initial coverage?

The biggest response, both with press inquiries and on the website, was during the first week. But it continued in waves for 3 months as other newspapers and then magazines picked up the stories. Most of the magazines, unless they were really specialized such as Scuba Diving Monthly, did not differ very much in what they reported from the daily stories.

Halpern, what about international coverage?

Researchers were based in the U.S., UK and Europe and in Australia. Coverage was strong in those areas, especially since the most degraded areas included the North Sea, the East Coast of the U.S. and the China Sea between Japan and China. Coverage also strong in China, but all of the press dropped the reference to the degraded area in the China Sea in their stories.

Bauers, did she feel that she was manipulated by the scientists?

I did not feel pushed or spun at all. I was very impressed by what had been done.

Links for SEJ panel - 'Making the Science Sing'

Anne Thompson story on NBC Nightly News:

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/23170513#23170513>

Study in *Science*

<http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/reprint/319/5865/948.pdf?ijkey=.QBRU7cadgPCc&keytype=ref&siteid=sci>

or

<http://tinyurl.com/3zxyq5>

MSNBC Story:

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23155918/>

John Nielsen NPR Story and “Talk of the Nation: Science Friday” roundtable:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=19085884&sc=emaf>

Center website for study:

<http://www.nceas.ucsb.edu/GlobalMarine>

EurekaAlert! Press release:

http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2008-02/uoc--srf021108.php

Sandy Bauers’ blog:

<http://www.philly.com/philly/blogs/greenliving/>