Science, Society and the Media

As part of the Academy's outreach activities, a report examining the relationship between science and the media was launched at a seminar held at the British Academy on 12 September 2000. An invited panel responded to a presentation given by the author of the report, **Professor Ian Hargreaves**, *former editor of the* New Statesman *and* The Independent. *The event aimed to highlight the important contribution social science has towards bridging the gulf of understanding between the public, media and science. The audience came from the civil service, Government, media, business and academia. Professor Hargreaves describes below some main issues that were discussed at the event.*

Peter Snow was perturbed. Here he was, about to chair a public debate between journalists, scientists and social scientists. The topic was the vexed relationship between science and the media, and the focal point was a report I had written on scientific communication. But the editor due to defend the press – Rosie Boycott of the *Express* – had failed to turn up.

The report's central charge is that after more than a decade of expensive 'public understanding of science' programmes, scientists still do not know or care how the media work. And they do not show much sign of understanding how public opinion works either. If science is to make progress in this area, I argue, it needs to pay more attention to social science – a proposition as welcome as an animal rights protester in the lab.

The view that science is in trouble with the public is establishment wisdom. BSE, the public revolt over GM foods and medical scandals have all undermined trust in scientists. According to a MORI poll for the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee, which published an important report on science and society earlier this year, fewer than one in five of us are willing to take the word of a 'government scientist'. Independent scientists fare better, but not as well as they used to. The Lords report concluded that 'public unease, mistrust and occasional outright hostility are breeding a climate of deep anxiety among scientists.' It urged a series of remedies, including dropping the label 'public understanding of science' which, it argued, smacks of a lost age when scientists said most problems associated with scientific advances were the result of public ignorance.

Today such a simple view of the problem is difficult to uphold. Social scientists who analyse the GM controversy or the story of nuclear power, say the difficulties arose because scientists and politicians cut themselves off from opinion and insights outside their circle. Social science argues for a more interactive process of communication between scientists and the public, and for a more open process of negotiation.

None of this has discouraged scientists from continuing to talk as if their difficulties with public opinion are primarily to be blamed upon over-excitable and dumbed down mass media. So far as scientists are concerned, the media form a distorting lens designed to obscure the passage of truth and rational argument. Sir Robert May, the government's chief scientist, was arguing this line recently, reprimanding an interviewer on Radio 4's *Today* programme for taking such a strong interest in Ed Hooper's theory that HIV was transferred to humans as a result of scientific error. The Hopper hypothesis is presumably one of those 'quixotic minority' views the Royal Society, no less, warns journalists against in the editorial guidelines it has asked the Press Complaints Commission to adopt as part of its editorial code. The Lords Committee recommended that the PCC agree to this dangerous text.

The idea that science will prosper by evading controversy or depleting the diversity of viewpoints is surely deeply misguided, if not undemocratic. It arises from the enduring fallacy that scientists can or should be able to control the terms on which the public gets information about science. If this were ever possible, it is surely no longer so in a world of instant, ubiquitous and inter-active media. Equally, the 'distorting lens' view of the media ignores work by social scientists on the complex meanings of media texts, and their social, historical, political and economic context. For example, a research report written for the House of Lords Committee analysing the GM affair would have us believe that newspapers can be plausibly divided into 'campaigning' newspapers, which tend to distort for effect, and 'reporting' newspapers, which give us things straight.

What struck me about the coverage of GM was the way that some of the papers which campaigned most stridently – the *Daily Mail* for example – also provided large quantities of reasonably well-balanced information and opinion. Equally, it is not hard to spot the loaded

cultural assumptions engraved into every word of that most sober of 'reporting' newspapers, the *Financial Times*, which published a leading article on GM food contrasting the relative attractions of 'intellectual barbarism and measured progress'.

Likewise when scientists write about the media in specialised journals, they tend to operate upon the assumption that their own work is 'objective' and unaffected by special interest or cultural context. So far as medical scientists are concerned, *The Sun* tells you lies, *The Lancet* tells you the truth. Journalists are slaves of cynical commercial systems, scientists independent truth-tellers.

To judge by the debate that Rosie boycotted, however, the scientists may be regrouping for reflection on these matters. Dr Chris Exley, a chemist from Keele University, had been nominated by the British Academy to respond to the report. He said that most of the problems in science communication should be laid at the door of scientists. Scientists needed to communicate more clearly and engage with alternative perspectives. Professor Steven Rose, director of the Brain and Behaviour Research Group at the Open University, went further. He argued that commercialisation was leading to 'science conducted by megaphone', with the risk that those scientists most skilled at shouting most loudly would acquire the most influence, regardless of the quality of their work or the independence of their position. The sharpest charge made in the debate was that too many scientists are willing to mislead the public about their work, in pursuit of acclaim or money.

Professor Brian Wynne, a scientist turned social scientist from Lancaster University, argued that most science bestsellers were about 'science without consequences'. He said it was the type of science that confronts people in their daily lives which generates real controversy and demands a more consultative approach to decisions based on scientific discoveries. Lord Jenkin, who chaired the House of Lords inquiry, reported strong resistance in scientific circles to his committee's recommendation that the term 'public understanding of science' be abandoned in favour of the more open 'science and society'.

The next test will come in the Government's delayed response to the Jenkin report; not least because ministers are often as keen as scientists on the 'media hysteria' account of science's difficulties with the public. The Government should realise that if it does dismiss the Jenkin report, it will align itself with a diminishing and out-of-touch scientific elite. Many younger scientists hold the basic democratic assumption that science should be challenged by citizens on non-scientific grounds, and see the media as a vital, if sometimes boorish, part of that process.

Peter Snow and Ian Hargreaves

Professor Hargreaves is currently Professor of Journalism and Director of the Centre for Journalism Studies at Cardiff University.

As part of its policy of engagement in areas of public debate, the Academy joined the ESRC in launching the report *Who's Misunderstanding Whom? An enquiry into the relationship between science and the media*, at the British Academy. Following a presentation by Professor Hargreaves, the issues raised by the report were discussed in a panel debate.

Members of the panel were:

Peter Snow, BBC Presenter (Chair)

Dr Christopher Exley, Birchall Centre for Inorganic Chemistry and Materials Science, Keele University

Dr Greg Philo, Research Director, Glasgow University Media Unit

Professor Steven Rose, Director, Brain and Behaviour Research Group, Open University

Professor Brian Wynne, Research Director, Centre for the Study of Environmental Change, Lancaster University

The report is published by the Economic and Social Research Council and is on the ESRC website at www.esrc.ac.uk