

Problems and prospects of accurate science reporting in the press

The recent editorial titled 'Smell, science and the press'¹ portrayed an important issue on the shortcomings of science reporting in the Indian news media. This is in fact an acute problem that currently exists among most Asian countries, since publishers of news media seldom recognize the need for precise science-reporting.

Even in the West, only a handful of creative, accurate and compelling science writers exist now. For example, in Canada only 37 science writers and editors work at 108 dailies, amounting to only 3% of all editorial staff. In fact, there are fewer full-time science reporters working for Canadian newspapers today² than in the 1970s. At a time when science is playing a crucial role in many stories from the decline of fish stocks on the Pacific and Atlantic coasts to the effects of ozone depletion over the Arctic, and from the use of genetically engineered crops to the global climate change consequences, the coverage of science even in the West remains inadequate.

Science writers can turn complex material into a story, which is not only exciting but also clear-cut and appealing to readers of dailies. Then, why is it that news organizations do not hire more science reporters and editors? Apparent fear

of spending extra money for this additional assignment appears to be a reason for the reluctance in hiring science writers in dailies.

An example is the *Montreal Gazette*, the only English daily in Montreal, which does not have any science reporter on its payroll. A science reporter's salary, benefits, travel expenses and other resources might be daunting to justify a position from the organizational standpoint, which might not generate revenue and advertising. In contrast, *The New York Times*, which publishes a regular science section, successfully sells pages of science and technology advertizing. Other dailies (in the West and the East) can follow this model.

It is time that news organizations in the Asia-Pacific region, which tops in the global human population density, recognize the importance of science reporting. They must have sufficient staff to cover science-based news. Journalists should give expanded coverage of science and technological development and other vital environmental issues on a daily basis. The rich and powerful corporations, which own many of the newspapers, magazines and broadcast stations locally and globally, should be more account-

able in strengthening science-based journalism.

Publishers of news media must remember what the Nobel laureate C. V. Raman once said, 'Science, more science and science for all time, is the answer'³. Thus a responsible reporting approach is urgently needed with diligent research, precise language and fair reporting to help society grapple with many daunting challenges of the 21st century.

1. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2004, **87**, 5–6.
2. Calamai, P., Canadian Science Writer's Association, Web version, 2004.
3. Raman, C. V., In *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 30 October 1950.

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Dramatically novel ideas

The editorial¹ in *Current Science* on the purported refutation of a vibrational hypothesis for smell that had gained popularity through non-peer-reviewed publications, was most interesting. It may not be an exaggeration to say that every researcher has encountered difficulties in persuading peers to accept some of his novel findings and models. Also published in the same issue of *Current Science* is an article² whose title proclaims the resolution of 'a 50-year-old mystery' in bioenergetics.

In this context, coincidentally, a recent issue of *Scientific American* carries an article³ by Stanley Prusiner in which he writes: 'In the early 1980s I proposed that the infectious pathogen causing scrapie

... consists only of a protein, which I termed the prion. The prion theory was greeted with great skepticism in most quarters and with outright disdain in others, as it ran counter to the conventional wisdom the pathogens capable of reproducing must contain DNA or RNA'. Prusiner did go on to win the Nobel Prize in 1997, for his prion proposal. But the protagonist himself adds³, one must say most graciously, 'The doubt I encountered was healthy and important, because most dramatically novel ideas are eventually shown to be incorrect'. (I hasten to point out, of course, that Prusiner's rationalization would in no way serve to exonerate the reviewers of my latest work – in this instance, the phrase 'myo-

pic morons' may perhaps be a more apt description of their outlook.)

1. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2004, **87**, 5–6.
2. Jain, S., Murugavel, R. and Hansen, L. D., *Curr. Sci.*, 2004, **87**, 16–19.
3. Prusiner, S. B., *Sci. Am.*, 2004, **291**, 86–93.

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