# Journalists and Astronomers



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## Summary

Professional astronomers often have to interact with journalists and other representatives of the media. This brings a whole host of difficulties, but the process can be beneficial for all parties. The author, being from the Vatican Observatory, is no stranger to media interviews and some hard-learned lessons are passed on here.

The talents needed to do science are often quite distinct from the talents needed to explain science. The best scientists are not necessarily the best interviewers or popularisers. Sometimes, of course, they are …, but we can't all be Richard Feynman or Carl Sagan.

Still, it is important that someone does the interviews. Our astronomy takes money; and the money comes from the general public, in one way or another. The people who ultimately pay our salaries, and give us the cool hi-tech tools to work with, deserve to know what we've done with their resources.

While it is claimed that the space programme gave us Teflon (not true, by the way) or that astronomy improves the gross national product by encouraging young people to become engineers (a stretch, but with an element of truth), those aren't the reasons why astronomers are paid to do astronomy. Our culture supports our work because, ultimately, we are here to feed a common human hunger to know. In a real sense, a part of our work is in the entertainment business. The cool photos of the Horsehead Nebula satisfy something in the human soul. But the Astronomy Picture of Day stuff is like the flashy top-ten song that makes you go and buy the CD; the hope is that eventually you'll also listen to the more subtle, but ultimately more beautiful song further down the list… which in astronomy would be, say, the details of plasma physics that explain the colours of the nebula. I think the physics is even more beautiful than the image, but it takes a lot of work to get there.

Thus we come to the frustrations of media interviews. You, the scientist, have a wonderful story to tell. But explaining it may make you sound like the guy who can't tell a joke, who gets tangled up in the details and never gets to the punch line. And you have little control over how it gets told. You're

at the mercy of an interviewer who, if they ever took even one university level science course, probably didn't do very well in it. I speak as someone who has had to try to teach astronomy to journalism students.

From the journalist's point of view, of course, life is no easier. This crazy science story that their editor told them to cover is one of five completely different stories that they have to pretend to be experts on today. And it's probably on a topic they hated, because they never understood it when they had to take it in college. Worse, the editor doesn't want it good; the editor wants it now. Stories are the filler between the advertisements, and today's newspaper will be lining the bird cage tomorrow. I also speak as someone whose first career choice was to be a journalist, working three summers as an intern on a newspaper before I learned that it was easier to do astronomy than to interview strangers.

So the path of least resistance is to dredge up the same clichés. If a phrase has been used so often that it has become trite, then it probably means it won't offend anybody and so it is safe to use again. And hearing it over again brings a certain comfort of familiarity to the audience. Who cares if it isn't true, or even logically self-consistent? Of course, this actually means that there is an opportunity here for both the astronomer and the journalist. If the astronomer can come up with a new soundbite, everyone's life is a lot easier. The journalist has a story; the astronomer has a chance to actually sidestep an old established half-truth. (And create your own new cliché!)

But the burden is on us, the astronomers. Writing a popular version of our science is as much work, and just as important to do, as writing up a scientific paper. It takes a special set of skills. If you aren't good at it, admit it: and ask for help. And give help if asked for it.

I'm the glib one at my observatory. I know that it; that is one of my jobs here. Also, at the moment, I am the only native English speaker in our Rome headquarters, which is an issue when half the interviewers coming here work in English. That is why I am often the designated one to talk to the press. But that's also why I have wound up, for instance, recently writing half a dozen articles about cosmology — including the entry for the next edition of the Catholic Encyclopaedia — even though my field of astronomy, meteorites, is about as far from the Big Bang in space and time as you can find in astronomy. That may also be why I am not a bad choice for such articles. I am far enough removed to see the forest for the trees, to see the shape of the story that an outsider — like me — finds interesting; but at the same time I am close enough that I can ask the real experts and have a chance of understanding what I was getting wrong, and how to put it right.

It's easy to complain — as I too often do — that reporters keep asking us the same questions. That's like complaining that every year, first year students keep making the same mistakes! In fact, it is an opportunity. Every time I am interviewed, I have my own comfort in knowing what is likely to be coming, and knowing from experience what sort of answers work. Like a vaudeville performer who's done the same act for years, I know how to pace the story, which details can be skipped over, where the laugh lines are. But to take advantage of this opportunity, to tell the story well, means having a clear idea of what the story is. Why is our research really interesting? What is the "punch-line" to the story that the average journalist, and reader, can appreciate? What are the essential bits to set up the story, and which details can I leave aside when I tell the story?

I remember the first time a bit of science I had done was written up in a popular journal. The journalist had seen (as I did not see at that time) the bigger context that made my little bit of scientific work relevant to the bigger questions in my field. The journalist had understood my own work better than I did! Since then, I have always tried to keep in mind just exactly why I am doing the science I do. Keeping a clear idea of the bigger picture makes it much easier to explain my little contribution to a journalist; it makes me a better interviewee. And by keeping me focused, this also makes me a better scientist.

## Biography

**Brother Guy Consolmagno** is the curator of meteorites at the Vatican Observatory. He has an extensive academic background and has written more than 100 scientific publications alongside numerous books. He is blogging as part of the International Year of Astronomy 2009 Cornerstone project the Cosmic Diary. His posts can be read here: http://cosmicdiary.org/blogs/brother_guy_consolmagno/