

Important for Good Press Relations: Accessibility

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Why do the European media often favour American results and institutions, for instance by using results from NASA instead of ESA? Is it just habit or is there a better relationship between editorial departments and NASA? Are NASA's stories more accessible for the media, more digestible or of a higher standard than those of ESA?

Accessibility of information is, in my opinion, a very important factor when cooperating with the mass media, as I will try to show. For the past year I have been an online editor and author for the Südwestrundfunk, one of Germany's major public broadcasters. My target audience has a fairly limited knowledge of spaceflight, the ISS, and of astronomy in general. When we write articles or produce commented image galleries we cannot do in-depth reporting, but have to focus on overview and comprehensibility.

I admit that I have learned to prefer NASA material. My reason is that we mainly do our journalistic research (What kinds of pictures and texts are available? Who might be an interview partner? What could be the focus of our story? etc.) on the web and with limited time. When one of my colleagues or I visit the NASA website it is easy to find the media and press section. It does not take long to find out that their pictures, video and audio material are available for use. So we can quickly assemble what we would like to

use and start producing our web articles — perfect conditions for my hectic guild! ESA's website also has a "media centre" and a multimedia gallery. So, everything looks fine at first glance. But when I needed pictures for an article about the Perseid meteor shower of 2006 I could not find any terms of use concerning ESA's pictures (neither could I find them when writing this text in November 2007). So I asked ESA's media relations department for permission by e-mail. The deadline for my article was only a few hours away, but usually press offices of major organisations handle this kind of query quickly or are prompt in telling the journalist that permission cannot be granted. ESA's reply and the permission came exactly 14 days later. The meteor shower had been over for many days, and the article I had finally produced with the help of NASA's pictures was already offline again.

If major institutions establish a press office, it must be in a position to serve the media's needs. In this case I would have needed the information within the hour; news agencies may need information within minutes. So somebody should be available during usual office hours to answer e-mails and calls. This sounds obvious — and it is — but it is still lacking in some press offices.

Journalists — who have to write about a new drug one day and about an archaeological

discovery the next — need to find accessible information and good interview partners quickly. If a useful and reliable source is identified (for the journalist, "reliable" means, among other things, that he or she can rely on getting an answer quickly) most journalists will contact the source again, for example when writing a follow-up of a story. In contrast, if journalists have had a bad experience like the one described above it may be quite some time before they contact such an institution again. Such poor press relations could be very damaging in the long run. All too often, it is just a handful of media-savvy scientists who dominate certain topics in the media, and such opinion monopolies threaten the balanced representation of science in the media.

Accessibility of information is crucial to good press relations and should not be underestimated by scientists and press information officers.

Bio

Diane Scherzler, MA, works as an editor for a major German Public Broadcasting Company. She has been concerned with the subject area "science, the media, and the public". Diane Scherzler gives media training to academics and advises scientific organisations who want to improve their collaboration with journalists.