

Embargoes: Stop Trying to Control the Message

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Summary

Embargoes are tricky beasts. For every reporter who says he couldn't live without them, there's another who chafes at the control they give journals and scientific societies. For a year, I've been chronicling embargo policies and breaks at Embargo Watch: <http://embargowatch.wordpress.com>. The experience — and feedback from reporters, PIOs, and others — has left me with the impression that three areas in particular have room for improvement.

Don't hype

It was impossible to escape the coverage of NASA's arsenic-based bacteria study in *Science* late last year (Wolfe-Simon, 2010). As *CAPjournal* readers probably know, the trouble started when NASA put out an embargoed press release containing the following: "NASA will hold a news conference at 2 p.m. EST on Thursday, Dec. 2, to discuss an astrobiology finding that will impact the search for evidence of extraterrestrial life."

That release, which led to wild — and inaccurate — speculation, should have been flagged, *Science* publisher AAAS's director of public programmes Ginger Pinholster said afterward, in a comment on my blog (Oransky, 2/12/2010). And once misleading statements from supposedly reliable organisations are out there, it's hard to unring the bell.

To be fair, a lot happened after that original press release, and scientists are now questioning the results in earnest. But the NASA release has left a bad taste in the

mouths of many reporters, not to mention the public that funds it. To paraphrase a children's' book, hyping releases is just like *Jack Crying Wolf*. After a while, reporters just aren't going to believe you.

Don't embargo information that is already public

By definition, you would think that embargoes could only apply to material that hadn't yet been released to the public. Otherwise, why would a reporter agree to one? In any number of cases, however, it turns out that scientific societies are placing embargoes on abstracts and studies that are already in the public domain.

Take, for example, the recent release of a find from Hanny's Voorwerp, released under embargo in January. That result, it turns out, had already been revealed in a Zooniverse/Galaxy Zoo comic book (Beatini, 2010).

When I asked about that, the ESA/Hubble public information officer Oli Usher told me

(Oransky, 10/1/2011): "As to whether there is a new discovery here or not — we are publishing this as a picture release (not a science release), so the question of whether there is new science or not doesn't arise. The issue is rather whether or not the picture is new. (It is.)"

The University of Alabama, Birmingham's Bill Keel, who worked on the Voorwerp, later posted a comment on my blog:

"For astronomy results, much of the rationale I've heard for embargoes from a funding agency (as opposed to, say, Nature or Science) is that many media outlets have a better chance of picking up the story while it's still 'news', so dribbling it out without the backing of the [Space Telescope Science Institute] name would be less effective. We did worry a little bit about the comic, but funding and opening-event timetables constrained us to get it done first. I was conflicted about this whole issue at the outset, because we had made a point of talking about much of the early work as we were doing it, in the very public Galaxy Zoo forum and blog sites. For

the sake of wider exposure (and potentially attracting more people to try out citizen science) we decided to honour an embargo when the HST results came out, resulting in my writing what may have been a slightly anguished blog post explaining why we weren't showing the images as soon as we had them processed. In the event, we did make enough of a splash to see the image on Letterman's monologue that night. Old media, meet new media, and both of you meet newer media — hey, stop that, all of you play nice!"

These are all fair points, and this situation was subtle, given that it was a new image that backed up an older interpretation. At the very least, having a discussion about what happened can inform future policy, and build trust.

What's less subtle is when scientific societies post all of their abstracts online in advance of a conference, then insist that they are embargoed, threatening to punish reporters who write about the abstract. That's what the American Astronomical Society (AAS) does at its conferences, and I just don't understand the rationale. The AAS never responded to my request for comment on the policy (Oransky, 8/12/2010).

Other societies, although none in astronomy, have changed their similar policies following Embargo Watch posts: The American Thoracic Society (Oransky, 8/8/2010), European Society of Human Genetics (Oransky, 7/7/2010), and the American Diabetes Association (Oransky, 31/1/2011). I'd like to see more societies, including the AAS, do the same.

Be transparent

If embargoes are, for some journalists, a necessary evil, then the policies that govern them should be transparent, to build trust in the organisations that use them. Otherwise, it is easy to imagine that institutions are only using them to control the flow of information — which is hardly consistent with the image that science seems to want for itself. Keep in mind that most of physics — for example, institutions such as the American Geophysical Union — do not use embargoes at all.

Timing and the Ingelfinger Rule¹ are two issues that often make me and other journalists wonder whether the purpose of embargoes is really to help reporters. If journals and societies want more accurate coverage, how are short embargoes — particularly those that are less than 24 hours, or even less than an hour, in the case of one medical journal — supposed to help? And how does the Ingelfinger Rule — which makes many scientists nervous about talking to the press before a paper is published — help spread scientific knowledge?

With that in mind, I put forward a draft policy at a public lecture in November at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (Oransky, 3/11/2010): "*Our embargo policy is in place to ensure as much coverage of research [in our journal/by our society's members] as possible.*"

This may divert attention from other important issues in science and medicine. Provided we have a reasonable interval between the release of material and the embargo time, it may also help reporters do a better job covering these studies.

However, policies that bar pre-publication publicity of scientists' work can also have a chilling effect on the spread of scientific knowledge.

Transparency also applies to decisions about lifting embargoes early. If the point is to ensure accuracy, it really doesn't help to leave embargoes in place so that journalists can't write stories that correct misinformation. There seems to be significant reluctance on the part of many journals and societies to lift embargoes. They will twist themselves into knots saying that a story hasn't broken a particular embargo because it doesn't name the journal, or doesn't have some level of specificity about the results. One society even told me that they didn't lift an embargo early because they didn't like the approach a particular press release had taken in response to their study (Oransky, 1/6/2010). That's just wrong. It was encouraging to see AAAS' Ginger Pinholster comment on Oransky, in response to the arsenic bacteria kerfuffle (Oransky, 2/12/2010), that "*in reviewing the sequence of coverage, I can see that the research (as opposed to teaser stories) had entered the public domain prior to the*

reporter phone call that ultimately triggered the embargo lift."

Contrast that introspective approach with that of NASA, which said its scientists wouldn't engage with criticism of the arsenic bacteria paper because such critiques appeared on blogs (Oransky, 7/12/2010). It was a sort of post-publication embargo, one that does not bode well for the scientific process or for transparency. Throughout the whole episode, NASA seems not to have followed its own code of conduct (Oransky, 8/12/2010).

As Pinholster noted in her comment on Embargo Watch, "*the darned thing about people is, they're human*". PIOs, reporters, and others won't always get embargo policies right. But a thoughtful discussion of what went right, and what went wrong, is likely to improve policies the next time around.

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Notes

¹ The Ingelfinger Rule is the outgrowth of a New England Journal of Medicine policy, now taken up by a number of major journals, which said the journal would refuse to publish a

study that had appeared elsewhere, including in the popular press.

Biography

Ivan Oransky is the author of the Embargo Watch blog: <http://embargowatch.wordpress.com>. He is the executive editor of Reuters Health and teaches medical journalism at New York University’s Science, Health, and Environmental Reporting Program, and is treasurer of the Association of Health Care Journalists. The views here do not necessarily represent those of any of those organisations. In the past, he’s served as managing editor, online, of *Scientific American*, deputy editor of *The Scientist*, and editor-in-chief of the now-defunct *Praxis Post*. He earned his bachelor’s at Harvard, where he was executive editor of *The Harvard Crimson*, and his MD at the New York University of School of Medicine, where he holds an appointment as clinical assistant professor of medicine. He also blogs, with Adam Marcus, at Retraction Watch: <http://retractionwatch.wordpress.com>.

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