

## **Truth - a still small voice in a world of spin.**

It's a pleasure to be here, especially as the alternative is to be painting the hall at home.

In my abstract I wrote of exploring the communication landscape and in that context painting is not a bad place to start as who controls the brushes and what rollers, brushes and paints are available means the same landscape can be painted in very different ways. The communication landscape is dominated by the media and so much of my talk will refer to the media and dealing with it, but the points transfer to other communication activities.

The media's painting of the landscape in particular ways exemplifies an activity that we all engage in, the practice of 'framing'. At its simplest this is communicating information in such a way as to allow, or even encourage, a specific interpretation, while discouraging or disallowing other interpretations. The same story content, framed in a different way, will tell a very different story.

Let me give you an example. Late on a Friday afternoon I have talked through a story with a journalist from a 'quality' Sunday paper. I have carefully explained and refuted the allegations and storyline put to me, only to find the story published 2 days later, combining uncorrected inaccuracies and framing so as to lead the reader to just one conclusion. The individual (not myself) targeted by the journalist is the one to blame and, in this case by association, so is the Government. This is not an uncommon experience for those who deal regularly with the media.

Members of the media will tell you that they are on no one's side. They are simply seeking to get to the truth of a story and to present information to the public so that they can make up their own minds.

This is transparently not true. The media does not exist to uncover the truth, or to hold anyone to account, or to educate. It exists to sell newspapers and advertising, generate visits to web pages and to attract audiences that justify the licence fee. Incidentally, it may educate, truth may be uncovered and people or organisations may be held to account.

Listen carefully to the style of the Today programme, read critically a red top or a quality newspaper. Ask yourself:

“which are the pejorative words being used here”,

“how did we get from that fact to this allegation”

“of these two protagonists who represents the common/majority view”

“how was the interview topped and tailed by the journalist/presenter”

“what evidence is there to support the opinions being expressed”

The media not only ‘frames’ but also filters information and together this is a serious problem.

Let me give another example. During the GM debate, if we can dignify it with that title?

There was a great deal of excitement about GM herbicide tolerant crops. The pollen from these crops was going to pollinate other crops, GM genes were going to “get out into the environment” and the country would be overrun with super weeds. I and several colleagues tried to open up a discussion about herbicide tolerant crops as there a plenty of examples of non-GM HT crops being grown in agriculture. Especially in the US. Apart from the difference in production – GM and non-GM these crops raise exactly the same issues. One example are non-GM HT rye grasses (these are wind pollinated, so if you wanted to achieve gene transfer they are a good crop to work with) tolerant of broad spectrum

herbicides. On several occasions we attempted to get the BBC to pursue this in order to explore is it wrong because it is HT or because it is GM?

A journalist was interested, but his editors did not think it was interesting.

Even the media's practice of demonstrating its balance and impartiality by providing two opposing views can seriously mislead. Without inside knowledge how does a listener or viewer know that Professor Smith represents the view of a tiny minority based on little or no reliable evidence, while Professor Brown is reflecting the generally held view, based on exhaustive testing and analysis over 20 years. The minority are not necessarily in the wrong, but the likelihood is that if their evidence base is weak then there is a question mark over their analysis/claims.

How then do we communicate science effectively in this unfavourable landscape, where spin, framing, filtering and sound bites rule?

The first thing to say is that in the UK the science correspondents and their coverage of science, is excellent. One of the positive outcomes of the furore surrounding BSE, GM, MMR and FMD is that science has a high profile in the media. There are plenty of opportunities to communicate science via the media; for those who have a little humility, a little humour and a lot of empathy. It may not be presented in the uniformly positive, even reverential, way that some scientists would like, but 'get over it'. Science and scientists have no basis for special pleading.

The majority of interactions between scientists and journalists are not difficult or adversarial. The problems arise when science becomes news: a scandal, a scare or a

cover up. It is when stories pass out of the hands of the science correspondents into the hands of the hacks when real problems arise.

(Use examples of science stories in the days media)

The second thing to say is that one way to overcome the filtering and framing activities of the media is to bypass them. Talk direct to the audience. There is much complaining in scientific circles about the perception and understanding of science among the public. But very few scientists are willing to spend any time talking to the public about science. If they did they would learn 1) there is no 'public' but many publics, 2) that generally the publics are well disposed towards science, but worry about how it is controlled and regulated and 3) members of the public value, very highly, the opportunity to talk about science and their concerns about it.

What is usually overlooked in discussions about science communication, and hardly ever appreciated by scientists, is that science communication is as much about communicating about scientists as it is about communicating about science. Consequently, much of my work has focussed on facilitating conversations between scientists and non-scientists.

Before I look at some practicalities of communicating science I want to touch on one other issue that is significant when communicating both science and Christianity. That is that we are communicating in a pseudo post-modern society, but a society that is also spiritually-seeking (albeit shallowly). Not many people understand the philosophy, but many are post-modern in practice – opinion is everything and one unbaked 'fact' is as valid as any other.

I recently heard a complaint made by a school student that "science is fact-based and my opinion does not matter". This begs many questions, not least of which is 'what is your opinion based on'? In an opinion-driven world there is great risk that we are just pooling our collective ignorance.

In the muddled heads of the post-moderns, truth is no more than the way that I make sense of the world that I perceive around me. This fits very neatly with humanity's wish not to be bound by external constraints that it does not control. You may recall a problem that arose over the fruit of a particular tree; a problem that originated in the desire to be independent; to control and determine our own destiny.

In our society, spiritual seeking and sensitivity is valued, sadly the search for mystery and reverence is increasingly expressed in various neo-pagan forms. The pick and mix of relatively undemanding spiritual and pseudo-spiritual practices sits well with humans' desire to shape their own destiny.

As Christians who are scientists we are doubly unfortunate in our messages. We believe in God, an absolute if ever there was one. More than that we believe that absolute was physically incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth and declared "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me." Not only an absolute, but an exclusive absolute. This does not sit well in a society where my spiritual path is just one spiritual path among many..

We are trained in a discipline that can provide evidence of the truth of certain claims over others, or at least evidence that some claims are more true than others. At its crudest - science is a test for opinion.

This does not sit well in a society where opinion is all.

What about the practicalities of communicating science?

Truth telling, with its concern for accuracy and precision immediately runs into conflict with the modern world, and particularly the media. In both science and religion caveats,

conditions and provisos abound. But if you work with public and media audiences then the opportunities for subtlety are seriously limited. It is extremely difficult to have nuanced discussion in a media interview. A news interview is typically 2-3 minutes, you may have no more than 60 to 90 seconds to present your science. Even magazine programmes such as The Material World will allow only 6-8 minutes per item in total.

This is an alien environment for the scientific community where communications typically are carefully argued from prior knowledge and well presented data to arrive at the key conclusions – in the last three sentences.

The media wants the whole story in the first 3 sentences.

You may have heard of the elevator pitch, beloved of the sales and marketing fraternity. Imagine you find yourself in a lift with an important person. They turn to you and ask what it is you do. You have 30 seconds to 2 minutes to explain the most important things about your work. You have to get the most important things out straight away, you don't have time to waste. Similarly with media interviews.

Press Releases always contain the entire story in the top 3 or 4 lines, the rest, even if it runs to 3 or 4 pages, is elaboration.

Similarly, in public exhibitions, publications and talks you have to engage your audience quickly, sometimes in a matter of seconds, rarely will you have more than a minute.

If you want to understand the communication landscape you are working in turn down the volume on the TV and count how many seconds a particular image remains on the screen, on average 5 to 7 seconds.

The good news is that there are guides available to navigate you through this landscape.. Most research centres and all Universities will have Press Offices – use them. There is plenty of good media training available through the Research Councils, the Royal Society and other organisations – take the opportunity to practice how to manage the media.

How do we balance truth-telling with the need for brevity and simplicity. My litmus test when preparing messages has become – “is this misleading?” Rather than “is this accurate?” or “is this precise?” In trimming this story to fit the medium am I misrepresenting the facts or misleading the audience?

You can achieve some startling differences in message by subtle effects. I recently heard it reported that the drop in traffic due to the London congestion charge was ONLY 8%. This could have been reported as congestion charging reduces traffic by NEARLY 10% . Both are true, both are more or less accurate. You might have good reason for using either.

In some cases you may want, or your employers may want, to minimize the impact of adverse publicity on an organisations reputation, so-called reputation management. As a Christian how do you deal with such a situation. Is it legitimate to ‘manage news’ or to ‘spin’?

Fortunately honesty is always the best policy, although it may be difficult to convince your CEO and senior managers. Going to ground is always an option and you may get away with it. Becoming unavailable for comment sometimes works, but it attracts attention, it immediately arouses suspicion and while you are in hiding someone else may be telling your story for you – in a way you may not like. Because of the way the media works, the

news that you have been withholding information is generally much more newsworthy, and damaging, than the information itself.

Telling the truth and getting information out as soon as possible are the two best ways to manage bad news. Telling the media about a story when it isn't a story is a good way to defuse a situation.

It is actually very difficult to manage messages in science. The scientific community is not a monolith. A single authoritative voice does not exist. There is often dissent about what early data means and while scientists are comfortable with the idea that ideas will be contested, the public has little understanding of how science works and sees argument and disagreement as a measure of uncertainty. The media loves controversy and conflict, so any disagreement will feed media interest. And it is always possible to find a maverick to express an opposing view.

As Christians we have a good example to set here. Patient respect for an opponent and their views, while firmly defending your own, will always create a better impression than engaging in a slanging match, or trying to point score.

In a world of spin most people employ the basic truth filter I described in my abstract. The louder people shout the less substance it is assumed there is to their argument. People are familiar with, and turned off by, the bluster of politicians and the arrogance of religious and scientific bigots.

Truth will always be a still small voice and I would suggest it does not need to bluster and bluff. But the still small voice does need to be constantly heard as a witness to the truth.

To finish. Can we say that Christians have any unique insights or resources to bring to communicating science? I would suggest there are several.

- 1) Our faith should lead us to be truth bearers and without question honesty and openness are the best policies in communication.
- 2) In Christ we have a great example of how to communicate complex ideas to non-experts. Agreed, the Holy Spirit inspired Jesus' words and perhaps what He had to say was more relevant to people's lives than the discovery of a new elementary particle. But Jesus is a good example for us to follow if we want to communicate science. He used stories and powerful pictures. He often used humour and He exploited the Jewish delight in the extreme and ridiculous when telling His stories. He conjured vivid pictures and often used something in the immediate environment as a visual aid. On one occasion, but only one, He even wrote something down.

Jesus' communication was always true, but not always straightforward, the meaning might be concealed, or not obvious, and this was done deliberately.

Jesus engaged people where they were, both geographically (he did not spend all his time in the synagogue) and emotionally/intellectually.

Jesus hooked people in by touching their interests and concerns.

Jesus' communication challenged people to think and to act.

- 3) As Christians the Holy Spirit indwells us, so we should expect that Jesus' promise to His disciples, that the HS would be their advocate and counsellor, will be made real in our lives. Why should we not expect God's wisdom to be guiding our efforts to communicate our science as much as we would expect it to guide our witnessing.

Following on from this, we take, literally take, the HS into every situation that we enter. I believe that the HS is able to act in and through us in ways that we are not aware of, touching situations and people without us being conscious of His activity. In situations of conflict, confusion and misrepresentation there is an opportunity for us a Christians to contribute to unpicking the truth from the spin and to bring God's peace and wisdom to the party.

- 4) Christ communicated in order to engage and empower people. He did not necessarily tell them what to think or how to behave, (He frequently made it pretty clear what He expected) but he did challenge them to think, or rethink. As a communicator, and specifically a science communicator, I see my role as equipping and challenging people to think. Empowering people to sift information and to arrive at their own conclusions. I would suggest that as Christians seeking to follow Christ's example we should be actively engage in communicating about science, not as a Trojan horse to slip in a bit of witnessing, but as a genuine effort to empower people by allowing them to engage with science. Science is an increasingly important and influential part of our world, if people are to have the opportunity to, as citizens, to engage in informed decision-making they need access to science and scientists.