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Professionally Responsible Communication With the Public: Giving Psychology a Way

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The larger society, which has paid for social science, deserves a fuller and more meaningful exposure to what social scientists have learned with its money. Moreover, social science would benefit in financial support and prestige from such exposure. The popular media constitute the most powerful vehicle for and the most formidable barrier against the professionally responsible communication of social science to the public. An approach for communicating responsibly with the public through the media is described. A central component of that approach seems dishonest but is shown not to be upon close analysis. It advises scientists to respond to the poor questions they may be asked by media representatives with answers to the good questions they could have been asked.

Booming About Big Issues

I should admit to a serious concern that beset me as I prepared this address on the subject of communicating responsibly with the public. It has to do with a warning issued by the biologist Steve Jones, who cautioned middle-aged scientists against the tendency to “boom about Big Issues.” He noted that around this age, they suddenly forget that science is the art of the answerable and begin to speculate about things that lie outside science altogether.

As I say, this point worried me because, first, I recognized that I had entered that particular period of life; and, second, for the only time I could recall, I planned to deliver a scientific society address on issues that fell beyond the borders of scientific inquiry. After some thought and library research, though, I determined to go ahead anyway, as the endeavor seemed worth the risk. That is, I decided that the questions—scientifically answerable or not—are of sufficient moment and weight to warrant our focused attention. After all, if there’s anything worse than a middle-aged scientist booming about Big Issues, it’s one booming on about small ones. So, let

me try to convince you of the pressing importance of communicating responsibly with the public by sharing some information.

The public does not understand or appreciate what we do as scientists. In the late 1980s, Sigma Xi, The Scientific Research Society, conducted an extensive survey of the public perception of science in this country. Their conclusion was sobering: “American taxpayers and the scientists they support are about as far apart as they could possibly be on the fundamental question of what science is” (Hively, 1989, p. 26). Five years later, the National Science Board published a report of its study into to causes of “trouble in the nation’s system of academic research”; listed first was a lack of appreciation by the public for the role of research (Celeste & Schmitt, 1994). Similar conclusions apply to psychology, in which reviewers of the history of the discipline claim that the public has never had a reasonable understanding or appreciation for our science (Benjamin, 1986; Wood, Jones, & Benjamin, 1986).

Part of the problem is ours. The use of jargon and “academise” prevents many in the general population from fathoming what we do. Too often, we assume incorrectly that everyone knows what we mean by the most common words and labels we use. Ask average citizens about the sciences of botany, anthropology, and zoology, and 39%, 44%, and 59% of them, respectively, express a moderate or strong interest. But ask about the same sciences labeled as *plants and trees, peoples of the world, and*

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animals, and the numbers jump to 77%, 81%, and 87%, respectively (American Museum of Natural History, 1994). More accessible language invites the interest of the populace.

We recognize the public's lack of understanding and appreciation but haven't been able to do anything about it. When Sigma Xi first polled its membership of scientists in 1987 about their concerns, the largest number listed interruptions in funding as their biggest worry. Just 2 years later, poor public understanding of science had replaced funding disruption as the number one concern (Hively, 1989). Closer to home, in a 1993 survey of American Psychological Association (APA) members, 32 issues were considered most important by the respondents. Of the top 3 issues, 2 were the public image of psychology and the public's understanding of applications of psychological research and knowledge (Oakland, 1994). A survey taken a short time later revealed that the membership was decidedly displeased by the results of the association's efforts on these issues: By far, the lowest grade assigned to APA in its activities was in the area of educating the public about psychology (Sleek, 1995).

As a result of the public's lack of understanding and appreciation of what we do, politicians are preparing to take away our funding. Observers of the national science scene (Sommer, 1987) as well as sympathetic elected officials (Gore, 1986, 1996) have been warning for years that unless scientists more actively promote the value of science to the wider society, financial support will be reduced by politicians looking for ways to slash funding for what their constituents do not find worthy. Commenting on a projected 33% cut in federal investment in nondefense research over the next 6 years, the director of the National Science Foundation, Neal Lane (1996), put it plainly to a group of scientists, "If you don't take it as one of your professional responsibilities to inform your fellow citizens about the importance of the science and technology enterprise, then the public support—critical to sustaining it—isn't going to be there."

GIVING PSYCHOLOGY A WAY

The upshot is clear: If the public is to be expected to fund scientific research, then researchers will be expected to describe—in a much more elaborated and ongoing fashion—what society has received for its money. On this point, I'd like to be blunt about the fact that although I have long been a fan of George Miller and of the spirit of his celebrated advice to "give psychology away" (Miller, 1969, p. 1071), I have never been a fan of the phrase itself. It implies that the psychological knowledge we have generated from our research is ours to dispense, gratis, to the public—when, in fact, it has always been at least as much theirs as ours because, in

any meaningful sense, they have paid for it. We should not think of the wide dissemination of that knowledge as a gift bestowed but rather as an order filled or, better still, a promise met. So far, although we have done a fine job of producing the goods, we have done a poor job of shipping them.

What I am suggesting, then, is a small but crucial change in the phrase. We should be devoting our efforts not so much to giving psychology away as to giving psychology a *way*—a way to communicate our science widely to the society and a way to do so in a professionally responsible fashion. Although much has been written and said about how to inform the public more effectively about psychology, I could find very little that advised us as to professionally responsible versus irresponsible means to that desirable end. That is something I will attempt in this article. As a starting point, we must recognize that we have a necessary and nettlesome partner in the process: the popular media. Paradoxically, the media represent the most powerful vehicle for and the most formidable obstacle to achieving the goal of giving psychology a way to communicate responsibly with the public. Let's examine separately each horn of the consequent dilemma.

The Media as Powerful Vehicle

The media have an enormous impact on the way the average person views science, scientists, and scientific issues. Here is some evidence:

The media can effectively construct almost any desired picture of the character and purposes of scientists with expected consequences for the popular image of the profession. For example, on prime-time entertainment television, which occupational group—besides the police—would you guess is portrayed as most likely to kill? I'll give you a hint: It's the same group depicted as most likely to be killed. Before you look too far afield for the answer (into the ranks of international spies or private investigators, for instance), you might first check your flanks because the answer is scientists—mad scientists, scientists with secret formulas, scientists of diabolical intent, evil scientists with plans to rule the world. Although such characterizations seem laughable when compared with the realities of the profession and its practitioners, that is not the point. The point is that the more people watch such programming, the more they believe that scientists are odd and peculiar, that science represents an undesirable career choice, and that science is dangerous (Gerbner, 1987).

In matters of scientific knowledge, public belief is often likely to be influenced more by media characterizations than by the facts. Just as would be predicted by the availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), media focus on racial

and minority group issues is reflected in the gross overestimation by the average American of the percentages of Blacks, Hispanics, and Jews in this country: 32%, 18%, and 12%, respectively, when they actually make up 12%, 8%, and 3% of the population. A similar kind of misconception can be seen in the fact that 49% of the adult population of the United States does not know that dinosaurs and humans lived at different times on earth (American Museum of Natural History, 1994)—something I am confidently prepared to label *the fundamental Flinstones error*.

Media presentations of scientific activities give the activities instant legitimacy in the public eye. I have recently begun work with a prevention research center on my campus, which offers programs designed to prevent psychological problems in people who are at risk (e.g., recently divorced or bereaved families). In seeking to persuade potential participants to enter the programs, we are careful to provide evidence of the scientific recognition and awards that have been given the center by academic reviewers, granting agencies, and federal overseers. However, it has been my observation that none of these credentials has the legitimizing power of one other thing we provide candidates: write-ups of the center and its programs that appeared in the local newspaper.

Not only will ordinary citizens assign greater validity and importance to your research if they see it profiled in the media, but so will the public officials and policy makers of the society. Karl Kraus (1990) made a related point about the legitimizing power of the media by asking and answering a provocative question: "How is the world ruled and led to war? Diplomats lie to journalists and believe these lies when they see them in print" (p. 81). As regards science, the evidence is clear that government decision makers get their information about science more from the media than anywhere else and that they use the media-based information—accurate or not—in formulating policy (Linsky, 1986; McCall & Stocking, 1982; Shaw, 1994). There is even evidence that scientists themselves use the media as a filter for deciding which articles are worth reading and citing (Phillips, Kantor, Bednarczyk, & Tastad, 1991).

The Media as Formidable Obstacle

If, as it appears, many people put considerable trust in the media's coverage of things scientific, we should ask whether that trust is justified. When I looked into the question, I found several disquieting points of information, each suggesting that the media present a major obstacle to our goal of giving psychology a way to communicate our science responsibly to the public.

Media representatives covering science are often not up to the task. Occasionally, this is so because of a capacity defi-

ciency, especially in the case of on-screen television reporters who seem increasingly to be selected for reasons of appearance rather than intellect. Take, for instance, the good-looking young TV reporter I recently heard describe presidential candidate Ross Perot as "a multimillionaire, many times over." More often, though, the problem is that those who cover science have little formal training in it (Perlman, 1994). The problem becomes particularly limiting in the case of the social sciences because those science reporters who do have formal science training rarely have it in *social science* (Dunwoody, 1986; McCall & Stocking, 1982). As a result, social science stories are typically given to general-assignment or feature reporters (Weiss & Singer, 1988), who have little or no scientific background at all.

Scientists and the media have distinct sets of purposes in the transmission of information to the public. This is not to suggest that the media's agenda is somehow less noble than ours, but in crucial places, it is very different, and the differences can lead to striking dissimilarities of approach. I will have more to say later about the general issue of differences in agenda.

The media do not properly accord social science the status of science. Media science researcher William Evans (1995) contends that unlike natural science (i.e., the physical, biological, and medical sciences), social science is not depicted in the media as a way of knowing that is distinct from common sense or mere opinion. He bases this conclusion on the results of a study comparing how natural science versus social science work was covered during a typical 3-month period by two prestigious newspapers—the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*—and by the evening news telecasts of the three major television networks (Evans, 1995). Each of the three major findings is unsettling.

First, in both newspapers, social science reports were virtually excluded from the sections devoted to science. Combined, less than 10% of the stories in the "Science Times" section of the *New York Times* and the "Science/Medicine" section of the *Los Angeles Times* involved social science. Instead, social science pieces were routed to the general news sections, where they made up 40% to 50% of the science stories.

Second, a scientific outlet was named as the source for natural science stories much more often than for social science stories. In the *New York Times*, a scientific journal was named about 3.5 times more frequently in natural science than in social science pieces (51.4% vs. 14.3%). In the *Los Angeles Times*, natural science stories had more than a 700% advantage (47.8% vs. 6.5%). In television coverage, the advantage was infinite in that no network evening news program ever mentioned a scientific source for a social science report (16.7% vs. 0.0%).

Finally, and most egregiously, in both newspapers and on all three news broadcasts, the terms *scientists* or *researchers* were used to describe those responsible for natural science research more than 80% of the time. Conversely, as can be seen in Table 1, these terms were withheld more than 80% of the time from social scientists. In their place were phrases such as *the authors of the study* or *the writers of the report* that emphasized the act of writing as opposed to researching. Evans (1995) argues, and I tend to agree, that by calling social scientists writers rather than researchers, the media convey the impression to the public that social science conclusions are based more on personal opinion than on scientific method. In all, by failing to acknowledge fully the scientific basis of psychological research, the media mischaracterize us and seriously disserve their audiences. What can we do about it?

Fencing With the Media

As researchers, we find ourselves in a can't-live-with-'em-can't-live-without-'em position relative to the popular media. On one hand, the media offer the vehicle for our compliance with the society's not unreasonable requirement that we let it in on what we are learning with its money. On the other hand, because of fundamental differences in background, belief, mission, and approach, the research community has always felt justifiably uneasy entrusting the report of its work to the media. No doubt each of us could tell a horror story of how our own research or that of a colleague was embarrassingly mischaracterized by an overzealous or misguided media representative (e.g., Boyatzis, 1995; Haslam & Bryman, 1994). I can see at least three possible reactions to the dilemma: fencing out, fencing for, and fencing in the media.

Fencing out. The first option—fencing the media out of the business of science communication—simply will not work, although it's a human enough response to having one's work misdrawn in public. I have colleagues who, having been once or twice burned in this fashion, refuse categorically to speak to media personnel about their own or others' research. But this approach is wrongheaded. For one thing, it runs counter to the public's desire to know more about what we are discovering and to the media's fervent interest in communicating it (Evans, Krippendorf, Yoon, Posluszny, & Thomas, 1990; "Media Is Fascinated by Psychology," 1995). Our journal system is wholly inadequate to the task, having been designed for communication within the scientific community—and rather narrow sections of the community at that. We can't shut out the popular media without shutting out the citizenry, who have a right to share in the knowledge they are funding or to move their funding

TABLE 1: Phraseology Used in Each of Five Media Sources to Describe Those Responsible for Social Science Versus Natural Science Reports

Type of Report	Terms Used in the Report	
	Scientist or Researcher	Writer or Author
Natural science	> 80%	< 20%
Social science	< 20%	> 80%

SOURCE: Evans (1995).

elsewhere. What's more, trying to stonewall the media usually worsens the problem of inaccurate reportage by depriving the reporter of expert voices and perspectives.

Fencing for. The second type of response—fencing for the media—has its own set of drawbacks. Here, the problem arises when the researcher complies too readily with the media's taste for newsworthy, highly charged, engaging material. Under these circumstances, the researcher can become not just a communicator of scientific information but an indiscriminate purveyor of it—in essence, fencing science for the media. The troubled recognition of this problem by many researchers is reflected in the answers to a pair of questions in the Sigma Xi survey report *A New Agenda for Science* (1987). The majority of scientists sampled believed that (a) nationally prominent research agendas (the fight against AIDS, for example) can cause scientists to succumb to pressures to release findings selectively and prematurely and (b) scientists are increasingly likely to sensationalize evidence to generate greater public exposure for themselves.

Fencing in. If neither of these ways for a researcher to deal with the media seems satisfactory, what of the third option—fencing the media in? It involves a realization that within the domain of public information, the goals of science and of the media partially overlap and that, hence, we would be well advised to serve media interests, but only at their intersections with ours. As communicators of our work, we must recognize the value of the media to ourselves and to the larger society. And, just as surely, we must resist the tendency to confuse or meld their purpose in this regard with our own. Theirs is to present current material of likely personal interest to an audience in clear and simple ways. Our purpose differs principally in its emphasis on the need for confidence over currency, in its emphasis on the larger (i.e., scholarly and social) significance of the information over its personal interest value, and in its emphasis on completeness over clarity (see Table 2).

There is nothing invariably contradictory in such purposes. The dissemination of new research information on gender differences in attraction, on televised

TABLE 2: Differing Approaches to the Presentation of Science Information to the Public

	<i>Scientists</i>	<i>Media</i>
Priorities	Confidence Scholarly and social significance Completeness	Currency Personal interest value Clarity/simplicity
Evidence	Scientifically generated data	Opinions of experts

violence and viewer aggression, on personality differences in responses to cancer, or on any of a thousand other topics would, if properly presented, advance the goals of both groups.

Perhaps the biggest difference between the groups is that of epistemology. For us, credible and useful information comes primarily from its grounding in scientific research. For those in the media who report on psychological science, such information comes from opinion samplings of experts and even nonexperts who are willing to speak to them. In their excellent article on the topic, Robert McCall and Holly Stocking (1982) relate a telling observation in this regard offered by psychologist James Hassett, who took a year off from his university to work in the media and who recalled his initial bewilderment upon making the switch: "I didn't understand where all the books were. . . . I was quickly informed that journalists don't use books—they use the telephone" (p. 989).

It is essential to our goal of communicating *responsibly* with the public that we recognize this fundamental difference and that we do not substitute what the media may consider satisfactory evidence (opinion statements) for what we consider satisfactory evidence. That is, although it is entirely appropriate for us to offer a journalist an opinion based on scientific work, it is professionally irresponsible to offer such an opinion when there is insufficient research evidence to warrant one—even if that opinion is all the journalist may want. The key to the professionally responsible communication of psychological science to the public through the media, then, is to comply willingly with the media's requests for our opinions on topics about which we can speak with data-based confidence and to refuse adamantly to provide our opinions on anything else.

My admonition to keep the media appropriately fenced in is vulnerable to the charge of "easier said than done," especially given the general terms in which I have presented my case. Accordingly, I shall spend the remainder of this article specifying an implementation of the approach in one arena in which academic researchers frequently find themselves speaking to the public through the popular media.

THE INTERVIEW

At various times during our careers, most of us have interacted with media representatives concerning our work. Usually, the interaction takes the form of an interview. Sometimes, it takes place in person; at other times, on the phone. Frequently, the event occurs on the air—on site in a radio or television studio or in our office or home through a live call-in hookup. In most instances, after describing our work or after merely being labeled as an expert on a particular topic, we are asked questions about issues connected to our area of expertise. It is in response to such questions that we can get into trouble.

The interviewer—acting in concert with the media charge to generate current, understandable, personally engaging information for the interview audience—may ask questions that cannot be properly answered from existing research evidence:

Dr. John Smith, your studies show that as women advance on the job, they communicate in a more assertive, malelike way at work. What's your opinion on how this is likely to affect male/female communication in the bedroom?

Poor Dr. Smith hasn't a clue but may well venture a speculative answer for any of several reasons:

I'll look bad. After being characterized as an authority, it may be awkward for Dr. Smith to offer no enlightenment in response to a question in his area, especially if he had already declined similarly in response to an earlier such question. Then, too, Dr. Smith may not wish to appear dull or narrow, seemingly having something to say only about his own data but nothing about its more intriguing ramifications for the larger picture.

The interviewer will look bad. If Dr. Smith has to decline to answer the interviewer's inquiries (especially more than once) because he has no relevant information to bring to bear on them, the interviewer will begin to look ill prepared or dim. This could lead to an uncomfortable tension between the two, causing Dr. Smith to feel anxious and the interview to terminate prematurely. In either event, Dr. Smith's opportunity to get his important material heard would be damaged.

I'm on the air. If, in general, it is difficult to refuse to comment when lacking supportive data in a media interview, the difficulty is particularly enhanced when the interview is on television or radio. It's hard to say, "It's hard to say" very often when the time required to do so is dear. Dr. Smith is no doubt aware of the limited availability and high cost of air time these days and may be reluctant to "waste" any of it on a series of polite but boring demurrals to poorly framed questions.

My thoughts will be as good as anyone's, probably better. Dr. Smith might decide that because no one can provide a good, research-based answer to the question, his guess

would be more informed than most and would constitute, therefore, the best response the audience is likely to get.

It's only an opinion. Finally, Dr. Smith might reason that as long as he was asked for his opinion rather than a definitive judgment, a response that is not rooted in relevant research findings is permissible—especially if he precedes his answer with a qualifier: “Well, it’s only my opinion, but . . .” or “Oh, I’d have to guess that . . .” Even researchers are entitled to their opinions, right?

Although each of these reasons is genuine, to my mind, none justifies Dr. Smith’s speculative answer to the interviewer’s question. That is so because each acts in the service of media rather than researcher goals for the communication of science to the public. That is, all five reasons incline Dr. Smith to answer so that new material of personal interest to the audience will be clearly offered and so that, in the process, the crucial research basis of the material will be removed. With the removal of the research base, so will go Dr. Smith’s ability to be confident in the information.

The last of the listed reasons, which excuses Dr. Smith’s speculative answer because it is presented as “only an opinion,” is troublesome in an additional sense. Perhaps in a world in which information were processed perfectly, such a rationale would have merit. In reality, however, many members of the audience will fail to differentiate critically between his data-based and opinion-based statements. They are likely to be impressed by Dr. Smith’s title and academic credentials and, consequently, are likely to lend credence to his pronouncements, whether based on good evidence or poor (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981). With respect to the communication of valid information to the public, Dr. Smith’s apparent expertise might do more harm than good.

*An Edifier’s Approach:
Something Borrowed, Something True*

So, in somewhat elaborated form, we are back to the same dilemma we started with: We need the media to get our information to the paying public, but the purposes of the popular media can manifest themselves in ways that are contrary to our own. I argued earlier that the two are not always incompatible. The idea of offering topical, clear, personally relevant material to an audience is not necessarily inconsistent with our attempt to give our research-based work and its implications greater exposure. What appears important to determine are the circumstances under which the two sets of goals are likely to mesh well versus badly.

The power of prepared information. Those circumstances might be best delineated with reference to the dimen-

sion of preparation versus improvisation. When we can carefully craft our presentation in advance so that we can be confident that what we offer to the listener is based in sound research procedure and is linked to issues of larger scholarly or societal significance, there is no problem and, indeed, much to be gained in accommodating the goals of the media in the process. This accommodation can be accomplished through any of a variety of devices: characterizing the research question and the scientific approach in detective story terms, mentioning surprising or nonintuitive findings, describing connections to issues of topical interest. The contexts in which the delivery of prepared material is most possible are those in which we control the content, for example, in written discourses on our work to the public: invited newspaper pieces or editorials, magazine articles, and popular-market books under our authorship.

In more interactive contexts such as the interview, however, we will almost invariably be asked to respond to questions for which we have no ready, properly considered, research-based answer. It is my view that to improvise speculative answers to such inquiries is professionally irresponsible. Does this view consign us to iterations of the “I can’t really speak to that, Ted” form of no comment? And does it mean that, in the process, we are destined to look narrow and dull, that the interviewer is likely to look poorly prepared, that the audience is going to lose interest, and that similar opportunities for communicating our work to the larger society will not come again soon? No.

Bringing the power of prepared information to the spontaneous interview. The key to extricating ourselves from this dilemma lies in bringing to bear on the interview setting the mission-consistent benefits of prepared information. That is, because our purposes as communicators of science are best served through the presentation of material that we have previously structured to be scientifically credible, we have to find ways to deliver only such material during interview interactions. It strikes me that we could do so via three routes.

Prepared answers. Prior to any interview, we should have prepared a few (three to four) data-based points that convey our central findings and that, as much as possible, conform to media goals for transmitting information to the public. That is, the points should be clear, engaging, and linked to topical issues. Under these circumstances, everyone wins. The media people get to inform and intrigue the audience with developments from the world of science, and the researcher gets to focus on those aspects of the work that he or she views as having the greatest import and scientific grounding.

Prepared questions. Second, we should recognize that many media representatives are willing—even de-

lighted—to ask questions from a list provided by the researcher. It makes their jobs substantially easier, their questions appear informed and insightful, and their choice of interviewee well researched (because he or she is always responsive and articulate rather than occasionally hesitant and stumbling, and the dreaded “no comment” is completely avoided). What’s more, if the researcher has crafted the prepared answers so that the information they contain is provided in a lively, interesting fashion, the goals of the media, the public, and science are simultaneously served. The list-of-prepared-questions technique should work well—and it does. But not always and not completely.

Often, the nature of the situation does not permit us to construct, much less deliver, a list of prepared questions ahead of time—in a spontaneous phone interview, for example. In other instances, even when time and circumstances allow the list’s use, an interviewer may choose to add questions not on the list or simply to ignore it. Under these conditions, we may have to resort to the final—and potentially most controversial—tactic for avoiding our dilemma.

Prepared evasions. If there is no scientifically credible reply that we know to the interviewer’s query, we should acknowledge it and deftly answer a different question, one that we can feel professionally justified in addressing. Although such a maneuver seems vaguely objectionable on its face, closer analysis suggests to me that, when done properly, it is not.

First, the tactic is very much in keeping with the approach of fencing in the media that was advocated earlier. It prevents us from violating our most basic professional responsibility in communicating with the public and, if implemented well, still serves media purposes. That is, as long as we strive whenever possible to build topicality, clarity, and personal interest into the answers that we do feel comfortable giving, the media people get what they value, too.¹

Second, the tactic of responding to a question other than the one posed need not be duplicitous. In any such instance, the researcher should admit an inability to answer the original question properly before shifting to the substantive, substitute answer. This is crucial.

Some Honest Examples

Recall the question that was addressed to Dr. John Smith. It asked him to speculate on the impact of his findings (that as women advance on the job, their modes of communication there become more assertive) on male-female sexual communication at home. I argued that without a suitable research base from which to reply, it would be irresponsible for Dr. Smith to attempt a direct answer. I also suggested that for Dr. Smith merely to

demur politely to the question would carry its own drawbacks.

Instead, from his vantage point as an expert on the research evidence on his topic, Dr. Smith could respond as follows:

Well, Bryant, we didn’t collect any data on that, so I can’t say what may have changed in the bedroom. But we did examine the consequences of women’s advancement at work on another aspect of home life—child-rearing practices. We discovered, to our distinct surprise, that . . .

or as follows:

I don’t know of any research on that, Jane, so I can’t speak directly to your question. But I do know that quite a bit of work has been done by Professor Pamela Green at the University of Texas on differences between men and women in the way they communicate about sexual matters. She and her coworkers have uncovered some fascinating distinctions between the sexes in this respect. First, . . .

or as follows:

Because we didn’t pursue that line of inquiry in our work, I’m afraid I don’t have an answer for you on that. But your question is important in raising the critical issue of the generality of our results. For example, can we expect our findings to hold for a variety of different kinds of women—and men—in a variety of employment roles? Well, here’s what we’ve learned . . .

Thus without ever violating professional conduct, boring the audience, or demeaning the interviewer’s questions, Dr. Smith can communicate with the larger society about the important features of his and others’ work and can explicitly reinforce the rule for speaking from a research base in the process. In our own exchanges with the media, it is vital to remember that we are not required to give poor answers to the poor questions we are asked. We have the option of giving in their stead great answers to the great questions we could have been asked.

Avoiding a serious blunder. There is a surface similarity and critical distinction between what I am suggesting and what some politicians do regularly in media interviews. They, too, avoid answering many of the questions put to them. An important difference exists, however. Frequently, politicians do not acknowledge that they are failing to answer the original question in the process of evading it. Initial responses such as “I’m glad you asked that, Connie” or “That’s a good question, Mike” often lead to extended boilerplate statements that answer no specific question. Although this approach may sometimes make political sense for an elected official, it is wholly maladaptive for a researcher seeking to commu-

nicate scientific evidence to the public. We must always point out when it is that we prefer not to respond directly to a line of questioning and why. If we fail to do both, we simultaneously tumble to the level of sneaks in delivering our message (part of which becomes that we are sneaky) and fumble the opportunity to enunciate, pointedly and publicly, the research-based rules by which we are bound as (social) scientists—something the media, recall, will not do for us (Evans, 1995).

A CLASSROOM LESSON

It should by now be clear that a necessity for turning a bad question into a good answer in an interview is the researcher's transition between the two. Some link, some association must be found to allow a smooth segue. A few years ago, I wrote a book for the popular market on the subject of influence and was sent by my publisher on a 12-day, 12-city, coast-to-coast promotion tour that averaged four or five media interviews per day. Of all the things to worry about in such an undertaking, the task of devising fluent segues between bad questions and good answers concerned me most. I knew from some local experiences that many of the interviewers I would face would not have read my book at all or in sufficient depth to generate incisive questions. I knew as well that several of the interviews would include live calls from audience members who had no experience formulating good interview questions.

I prepared as well as I could: I knew my material inside and out, I had multiple copies of my list of preferred questions to give to interviewers, I had a ready set of engaging answers that focused attention on the material I felt was most important to convey, and I arranged for a few practice interviews on local shows. I was bothered, however, by the realization that because I could not anticipate the impromptu questions I would receive, I would not be fully prepared. I would have to be spontaneous and creative with my segues, and I worried that my creativity in this regard might be low after several brain-numbing days on the road.

A few weeks before the tour was to begin, I had an especially long day of teaching. Besides my own two classes, I gave guest lectures in a pair of introductory-level courses. By the end of the day, I was tired but no longer concerned about my ability to redirect a wayward line of inquiry deftly to the heart of the material I wanted to present. I had recognized during that long day in class that the tactic was something I had been using all of my professional life. As a result, it had become so over-learned, so practiced, that I could manage it virtually in my sleep.

Who among academics has not repeatedly participated in events like the following: We are sailing along

in a lecture when a student asks a question that either has no good answer or could take us far afield from the core of our information or both. We know from experience that it would be a mistake to brush the question aside abruptly—for weeks, that student, as well as others, would be reluctant to raise subsequent questions for fear of similar treatment. So we acknowledge the question and deflect it to the course material that we can speak about with confidence:

No, Stacy, Milgram never did extend his analysis of obedience to address the question of why parents always want their kids to obey them even after they've gone off to college and are old enough to make their own decisions. But your question leads us to a point that he did consider: What are the forms of authority that command obedience in this society? Parental authority, as your question rightly suggests, is certainly one. But what about governmental authority? Milgram argues that modern political structures have created what he terms an agentic state, in which governments . . .

Note the similarity between this type of classroom response and the type of response I have suggested to inapt media questions. I began the tour, therefore, feeling confident about my capacity to abet and, simultaneously, to restrain the media in the communication of my work to the public. I ended the tour feeling the same.

CONCLUSION

To fence successfully with the media, we need to employ the lessons we have learned from both of our traditional roles—researcher and teacher. In the role of researcher, we come to an invaluable perspective on the scientific grounding of the information. We, better than anyone, know what should and should not be transmitted in terms of its scientific merit. In the role of teacher, we know how to prepare meritorious information for favorable receipt and how to turn even misguided inquiries into opportunities to present our strongest material. It normally takes years in our twin roles of teacher and researcher to master these lessons and to know how to apply them optimally. It would be a pity if we failed to recognize how felicitously those same lessons can be applied to an emerging third role—one that requires not just that we do or teach our science but that we also edify the public with it.

NOTE

1. To their credit, the media are less interested in asking useful questions than in obtaining useful answers. That is the case because so is virtually everyone in their audience. We need to face reality squarely here: As academic researchers, we are the only group that is more interested in and more excited by questions than by answers. We should be careful not to project our peculiarity in this regard onto others.

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