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Science, Socrates and the media

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There is no use denying it: whenever a scientist gets a piece of news in a newspaper or on television concerning his own field of research, eight times out of ten he feels irritated. The reason does not solely depend on the fact that, in his opinion, the news given to the public is often rather inaccurate or centred on secondary aspects, sometimes even distorted. There is actually something more… Something deeper that the scientist can hardly grasp.

Besides, it can be hardly denied that each time an inexperienced scientist writes in a newspaper, eight times out of ten he is rather obscure and even boring. If that same inexperienced scientist has the chance to speak live on a TV show, nine times out of ten he will appear inadequate to the task or even completely lost.

"Lost" is the right adjective to define the way an inexperienced scientist feels when he comes into contact with the media, both when he plays the passive end-user and, even more so, when he plays an active role. He has nothing to do with mass communication. He does not understand its basic rules, language, timing and priorities and he feels vexed; the typical irritation of a scholar who suddenly finds himself in a world he cannot understand, because he does not know it. Nine times out of ten, scientists do not know the media.

The problem is that most people obtain information about science through television and newspapers. On the one hand, public opinion becomes more and more relevant to the political choices of science, on the other, the general public is extremely interested in the effects of scientific progress. Thus the relationship between science and

the media is becoming more and more important, sometimes even crucial, both for society in general and for a scientist's work.

This is no small problem since we all have become aware that the relationship between science and the media is acquiring some cultural, even democratic implications of prime importance. Similarly, it is also clear that the media hardly know how science works and that scientists hardly know how the media work. The problem has remained unsolved for a long time, and if it was so hopelessly unsolvable, it was mainly the scientists' fault.

In the world of the media people have always known they do not know science: in theory, nobody has ever refused the idea that some "media workers" might devote themselves to investigate science thoroughly. Throughout the world some initiatives were launched to make journalists become more acquainted with science. Actual courses in communication of science were promoted in many countries. All these initiatives were successful. At present there is a growing number of journalists throughout the world who know quite well how science works.

However, the scientist's feeling of irritation concerning the communication of science through the media has not been much abated. A considerable number of experienced journalists is not sufficient to assure high-quality scientific information (whatever the meaning of this word might be) in the media.

Something, however, has recently changed. Researchers now understand better and more clearly than before how important the relationship between science and the media is. They have also realised that they do not know how the media work and they have begun to show the desire (and the necessity) to understand them better.

Some years ago Jim Hartz a journalist and Rick Chappell a researcher at NASA Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama, discovered that this "socratic" desire (necessity) to learn about the media is actually very widespread within the scientific community in the USA: according to the results of their survey, 90% of American scientists wish to establish dialogue with the representatives of the (alien) media world and about 75% of them declared that they were ready to enrol on courses to learn how to use the means of mass communication.[1]

[1] Jim Hartz e Rick Chappell, 1977, *Worlds Apart: How the Distance Between Science and Journalism Threatens America's Future*, Nashville, TN: Freedom Forum First Amendment Center

In the light of these results, the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, a research centre which is part of the Vanderbilt University Institute for Public Policy Studies, elaborated six different recommendations to develop communication of science in the USA: the fourth one concerns the necessity for young graduates to attend classes on mass communication if they really want to become scientists. According to the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, mass communication of science is a professional requirement for every modern scientist.

But this was not the only idea and it was not confined to the USA. Britain's Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council recently announced that a £500 cheque (about €800) will be added to its future scholarships to be spent on training classes in mass communication. Thus all Her Majesty's young physicists and engineers will have to know the media world. Scientific magazine *Nature* agrees: if scientists desire to communicate efficiently they have to learn how the media work.[2]

There is no room for doubt that other similar projects are going to spread all over the world. All scientists are going to have a specific knowledge in mass communication since this aspect has become necessary to the progress of science and finally, nine times out of ten they will no longer feel like aliens in the media world.

Thus, will they cease to feel irritated when reading the newspapers or watching TV? Probably not, if they think they can control the media simply just because they know them. In a free country, mass communication can be scrutinized, even influenced but it cannot be controlled. By approaching the media world with increased awareness, scientists can hope to become more visible, to draw more attention to their research, to promote scientific knowledge but they will compete with other people who will also try to become more visible, to draw more attention to their own cause and to promote other forms of knowledge which could also be adverse to science.

In the media world, the feeling of irritation seems inevitable but those who are aware of this, feel it inevitably less.

[2] *Media studies for scientists*, Nature, **416**, 461 (2002)