

## **When science hits the headlines...**

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A survey has been recently carried out for the first time in Italy concerning science communication through the media and the result has been that science hits the headlines. It is often front-page news in the press and it is also often among the main points of the news on TV.<sup>1</sup>

This is not very surprising. Scientific culture constantly shapes, perhaps more effectively than any other form of culture, the perception of self and of the surrounding world. Moreover it is the main source of technological innovation. Technology permeates everybody's life.

The constant presence of science in our culture, in our imagination and in our everyday life produces a general demand for scientific information. The mass media basically manage to accomplish this crucial social task, by satisfying this general demand. Scientific information is actually becoming one of the decisive points in the democratic governing of the "society of knowledge".

The growing role of science in the media mirrors the change that the popularisation of science is undergoing in the scientific environment as well as in the whole of society.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Montolli, *Permanent observatory on science communication through the media*, Jekyll.comm N. 3, [http://jekyll.sissa.it/jekyll.comm/commenti/foc03\\_01\\_eng.pdf](http://jekyll.sissa.it/jekyll.comm/commenti/foc03_01_eng.pdf).

This quantitative growth, however, results in an incredibly complex problem of quality. That is to say that it gives rise to many questions. Which kind of scientific information is transmitted by the media? Which role does the information transmitted by the media play in the construction of the public image of science? And, similarly, to which image of science, if any, do the media refer when transmitting scientific information? Who popularises science through the media? Is it possible (and desirable) to train those who popularise science?

Over time, other cultural aspects have gained or lost the power to grasp people's attention or, in other words, their role in the media has changed. In this case, the vast literature on sociology of communication can be a useful source of information to answer these and other questions.

Nevertheless science, as a cultural dimension, has its own specific features. One of them is certainly its distance from common sense. Alan Cromer, the physicist, wrote that science is "uncommon sense"<sup>2</sup>. The history of science is based on a progressive distancing from common sense which is, by definition, the way people perceive things and the way the media perceive and transmit information.

The real, cultural problem in science popularisation is this distancing from common sense and not the translation of specific terminology – a technical aspect which is common to other cultural dimensions.

These questions and problems will be at the centre of the "First Conference on Science Popularisation" organised by the Master's Degree in Science Communication, SISSA, Trieste, and by Nuova Civiltà delle Macchine of Forlì and which will be held in Forlì, 24-26 October 2002.<sup>3</sup>

*Translated by **Marcello Di Bari**, Scuola Superiore di Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori, Trieste, Italy.*

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<sup>2</sup> Cromer A., *Uncommon Sense: The Heretical Nature of Science*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> "Primo convegno sulla comunicazione pubblica della scienza", Forlì, Italy, 24 - 26 October 2002. Further information: Nico Pitrelli, tel. +39 040 3787462.