

The magic of the media

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A word of warning for scientists: don't appear on talk-shows. Not only would you probably run into a magician, you might even be mistaken for one, which is much worse.

And do not ask the press, the radio and television to put their magical mentality aside: the media are condemned to it. It is not just a matter of what the audience wants. It is the cause-effect relations the media constantly have to establish that have per se something "magic".

Umberto Eco, an expert in semiotics and a distinguished writer, has no doubts about it: science fails to attract public opinion. And the little the media can offer is not science but magic.

Umberto Eco suggested this interpretation of the relation between science and public opinion in an article published in the daily newspaper *La Stampa* on November 10th 2002. The article was then taken up by *Scienza & Paranormale*, the journal of the Italian Committee for the Investigation of Claims on the Paranormal (CICAP), in its January-February 2003 issue. The CICAP itself, which can boast such honorary members as the Nobel Prize winners Rita Levi Montalcini and Carlo Rubbia, organized a conference with the alarming title "Is magic back?"

It is clearly a rhetorical question. The CICAP knows – as we all do – that even though four hundred years have passed since the birth of Galileo's *new science*, magic

has far from disappeared from our hypertechnological western societies, and we have not yet entered what Isaiah Berlin called “the Age of Enlightenment”.

Magic is not restricted to the endless list of people consulting sorceresses, fortune-tellers and shamans. It is deeply rooted in our society, and it keeps spreading. All of us, though totally ignorant of technology, are used to switching the light on with the tip of our finger and surfing the Web with a click of the mouse, without the least notion of how electrical and data transmission systems actually work. As Eco says, magic is nothing but the presumption of moving directly from the cause to the effect, bypassing – and not even knowing – the intermediate steps. It is exactly this sort of magical presumption that in the past generated the alchemic trust in the elixir of life, and that today generates the pharmaceutical trust in the pill of eternal youth.

We leave it up to Umberto Eco’s article and other references to investigate the possible causes of this odd situation, where magic triumphs over a high-tech world in the almost total absence of science and rational criticism on the part of the masses.

In the present article we shall focus on Eco’s analysis of the media as vehicles for magic culture, a topic which is more relevant to our area of interest. As such the media constitute a stumbling-block to the spreading of a culture based on critical thinking.

Over the last few years both a conceptual evolution (the commercialisation of the news and the ever-growing adherence to the principles of marketing) and a technical evolution (the assault of computer science and the increase in the amount of information processed in the same period of time) have significantly lowered the threshold of critical evaluation. In the end, this results in an almost automatic short cut from the cause to the effect (the event/news). Umberto Eco is absolutely right in saying that, for structural reasons, the media give us a magical view of the world.

In this magic representation of the world, in this unbearable lightness of the media, science evaporates. So scientific information tends to become pseudo-scientific information.

If this is how things really stand, then we are tempted to tell scientists (and scientific journalists) to keep clear not only of talk-shows, as Eco recommends, but of all mass media. Otherwise not only might they end up communicating science next to some modern and/or ancient magician, but they could even be seen as (modern) magicians themselves.

Easier said than done. The presence of scientists and scientific journalists in the media is no longer optional. It is no longer an opportunity offered to those scientists

who, in the interest of society or to praise their own vanity, try to communicate to the public at large, or to journalists who decide to remain in their more or less golden cage and address a smaller niche of audience. The presence of scientists in the media has become an inescapable professional need. And the attention devoted to science by the media has become an inescapable social need, given the ever-increasing role of science in all aspects of our daily life.

Whether we like it or not, science and scientists “have to” be present in the media.

So this is the problem we humbly have to face (anyone who has a ready-made solution is asked to come forward): how to communicate science (also) through the media at a time when the media are structurally inclined to communicate magic rather than science.

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