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Credibility in Science and the Press

A recent lead story in *Time* entitled "Crisis in the Labs" characterizes the American researcher as under siege because of recent cases of fraud, misconduct, and error by scientists. While accepting responsibility for such aberrations, the scientific community has a right to ask whether recent examples of plagiarism, fabrication, and unethical conduct in the press demand an analogous article entitled "Crisis in Journalism." The parallelism between the problems and responsibilities of each community suggests that a set of procedures in both science and journalism could benefit the credibility and accountability of both professions.

A community that depends for its success on the responsibility of many individuals has difficulty in being collectively accountable for the misdeeds of some of its members. No one suggests that *Time* or the *New York Times* should be ashamed of themselves because of stories published in the *National Enquirer* or because pornographic magazines are available in every hamlet in America. Individuals and institutions are made accountable in journalism and in science by taking seriously those who are consistently accurate and reliable and ignoring or decrying those who are consistently sensationalized and inaccurate. Pressure is increasing to create an overarching authority in science that could prevent the occasional mountebank or misguided institution from having a brief moment of notoriety. Freedom of the press and freedom of scientific inquiry are similar in the sense that an overarching directorate would kill the enterprise, but each profession is accountable in the establishment of procedures that responsible journalists and responsible scientists are expected to maintain.

Once the similarity of accountability in the two professions is recognized, they can help each other to be of greater service to society. There are many examples these days of improper conduct, of which the recent coverage of the chemical Alar, used to slow the ripening of apples, is a dramatic example. In that case, a clearly dubious report about possible carcinogenicity by a special interest group was hyped by a news organization without the most simple checks on its reliability or documentation. This caused panic among consumers and losses of millions of dollars by apple growers. Confronted with the inadequacy of the data, a spokesman for the public interest group recently suggested that it was excusable because people are eating more apples than ever before. That is like an embezzler justifying embezzlement by saying the banking industry continues to survive. Worse, the public's disdain for repeated scares indicates that an individual publication's (or broadcast group's) willingness to cry "wolf" uncritically may be destroying the press's own credibility and its ability to provide legitimacy to responsible environmentalists. The *Time* article acknowledges this by pointing out that the press has been too willing to publicize Jeremy Rifkin's cries of alarm, which so far have been consistently wrong.

The press cannot be expected to have in-house scientists for every occasion, but can be expected to establish procedures to improve its own credibility. "Scientific" reports vary from articles in refereed journals to statements released at dataless press conferences. The credibility of scientists varies from those with records of objectivity to others who only travel from press conference to press conference and law court to law court saying what their clients want to hear. The ultimate decider in all controversial matters must be the data in a well-run experiment, but the press and science can catalyze a mutual accountability if the press would routinely reveal the journal in which the information is to be or was published and disclose the track record of the scientists or the group of scientists (for example, the National Academy of Sciences, Exxon, or the Natural Resources Defense Council) that are quoted. In a democracy the right of an industry to state that its compound is safe and the right of a public interest group to cry out with alarm cannot and should not be suppressed, but a press that equates a peer-reviewed experiment with a public relations document should expect the public to equate *Time* with the *National Enquirer*. So a policy of routinely revealing sources and records would improve the credibility of the press and expose those scientists who fail to maintain standards of objectivity.

The scientific community, like the press, must be willing to develop rules and procedures to maximize accountability, an example of which would be a mutual agreement that press conferences without peer-reviewed data should be greeted with heavy skepticism. In that way both the press and science can be credible without stifling either the freedom of the press or the freedom of scientific inquiry.—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.