

Press Conference Protocol

Making Sure the Media Gets the Message



What Mr. Deity Did Right:

- * He did some prep work with his “peeps.”
 - * He paid attention to appearances and “staging.”
 - * He opened with a bit of levity to loosen the crowd.
 - * He gave the context for the press conference in his statement, outlined the problem, and addressed it.
 - * He worked in a “trademark gesture.”
 - * He kept it short.
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Where Mr. Deity Went Wrong:

- * He lost focus on the “Kobe question”; complicated the issue and diluted his “message.”
- * He went off on a weird tangent about flossing. (!)
- * He didn’t take questions.

Then again, he **IS**
the Deity!



Scientists face a tougher sell than Mr. Deity

People are interested in science, but scientists speak a different, highly technical language.

How can they connect with the general public?



Why it's so important to connect:

If scientists don't speak up, they lose all control over the message -- and that affects how science news gets covered.



And we end up with coverage like this:

“String theory says that these seemingly amorphous infinitesimal aspects of matter are made from other dimensions, compressed to a smallness that strains imagination.”

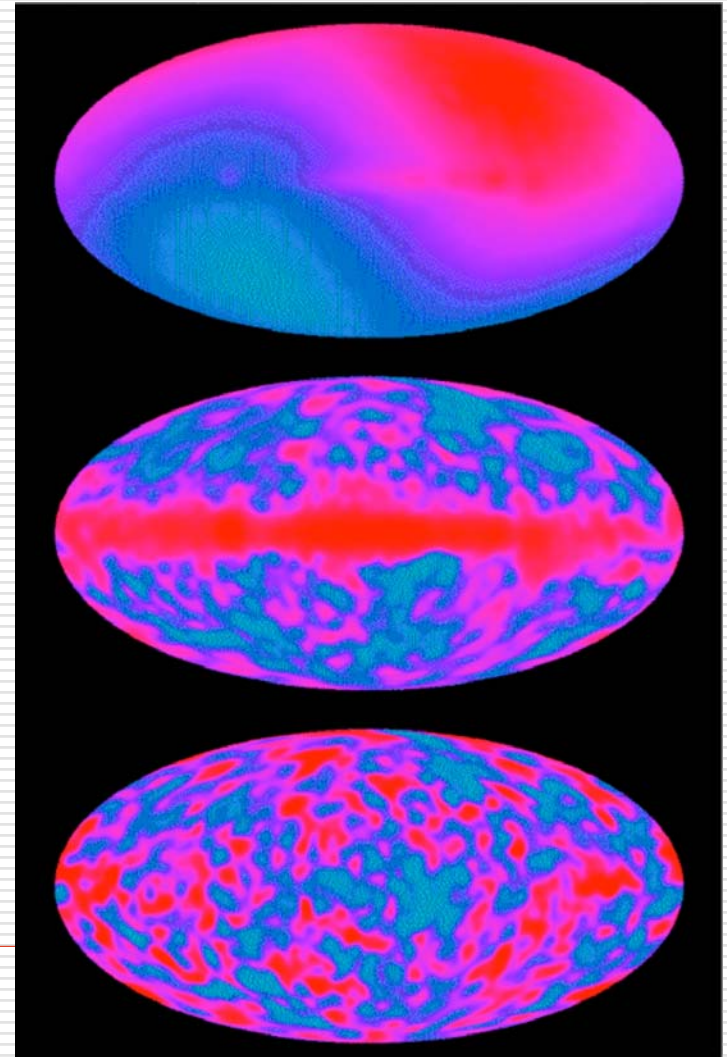
Greg Easterbrook in SALON (Sept 2006), who also insisted in the same article that “Quarks don’t have content.” He was trying to use string theory as a basis to support Intelligent Design/Creationism.

My First Official Press Conference: COBE!

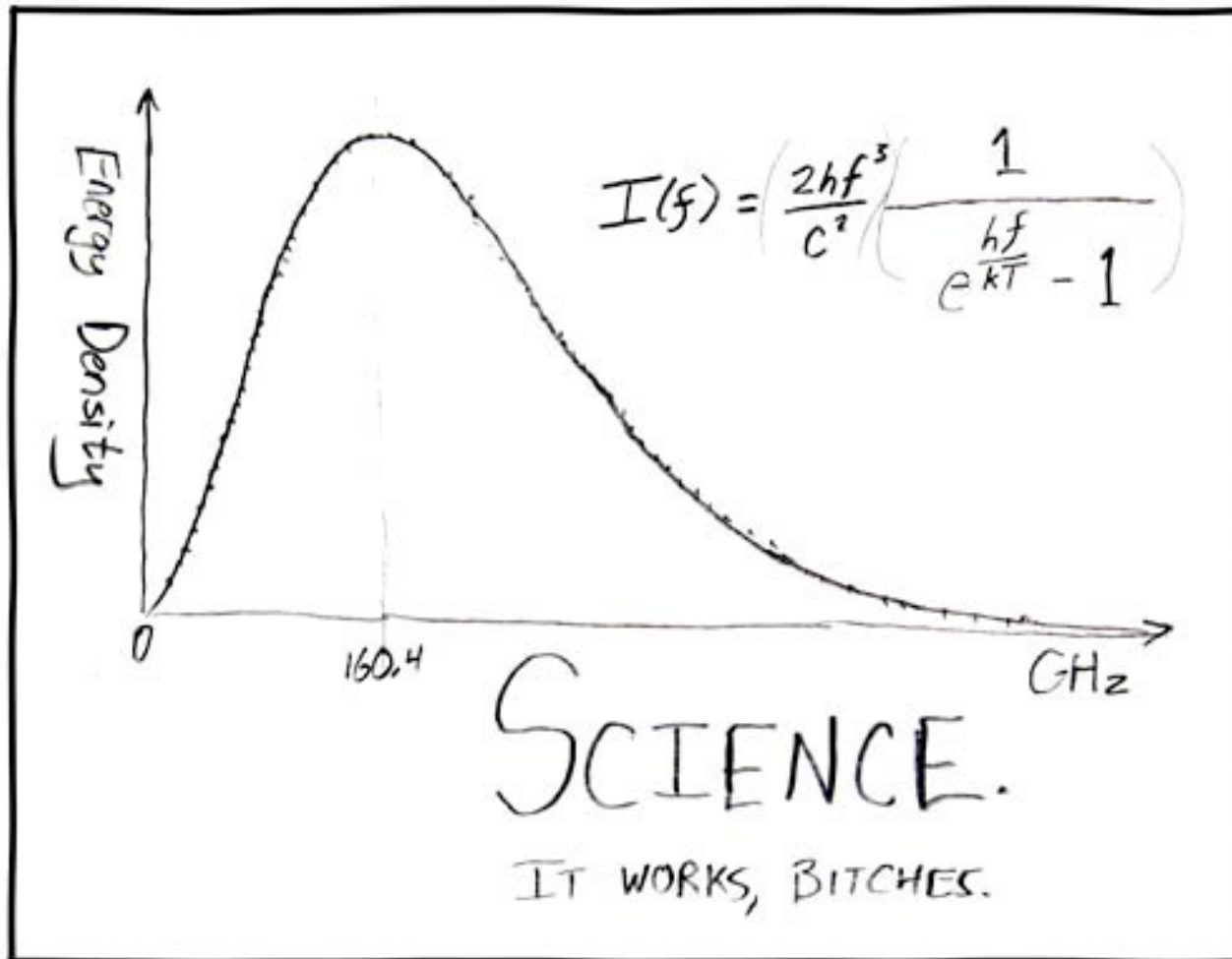
April 1992 APS Meeting:

Big news! Hawking called COBE results “the greatest discovery of the century, if not all time.”

Press conference was packed, with TV cameras, radio and print reporters.



Work honored with the 2006 Nobel Prize in Physics:



Alas, most press conferences aren't nearly as exciting:

2006 APS March Meeting: Press Conference on Graphene



*A very exciting breakthrough!
2D carbon sheets were thought to be purely theoretical.

* Graphene promises to be a major contender to carbon nanotubes for future nanoscale electronics. Application!

How did the press respond?

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HOW ARE YOU GOING TO PAY FOR IT?

WILL IT INCREASE TAXES?

WHAT ABOUT OUR TOLLS?



THESE PRESS CONFERENCES ARE GETTING REPETITIVE.



WON'T YOU?

What went wrong?

Presenters were WAAAY too technical! From my notes:

- Quantum Hall Effect
- The Klein paradox
- Berry's phase
- Aharonov-Bohm effect
- Fine structure constants
- Superconducting field-effect transistors

None of these were defined for the assembled reporters.
DON'T ASSUME KNOWLEDGE THAT ISN'T THERE!

An excellent counterpoint from Peter Armitage:

Scientists are always asked to emphasize applications, when that's the aspect they are least excited about.

But here's how Armitage conveyed his excitement:

“The electrons in graphene are described by the same formalism that applies to the relativistic particles of the Dirac equation. One can simulate the rich structure of elementary particle physics in a tabletop experiment!”

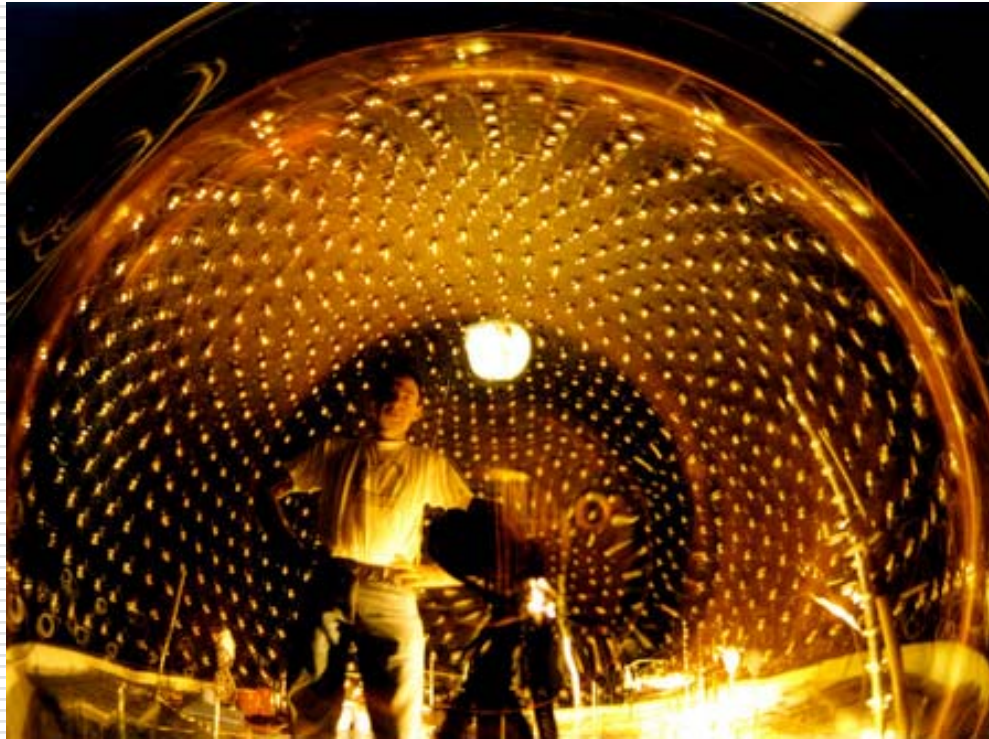
Using an exclamation point at the end isn't enough!

Graphene fell victim to Technological Tourette's!



2007 APS April Meeting: MiniBOONE Results

My current “gold standard” for science press conferences
(Presenters: Janet Conrad, Heather Ray, Eric Zimmerman)



What they did right:

Defined neutrinos, including broader context

-- where they fit in the Standard Model

-- history of solar neutrino problem and how solved

Described neutrino oscillations with nifty demo!

-- Two tuning forks with matching frequencies, except one had a tiny bit of mass attached to one of its tines.

Reporters could hear, right there, how the mass affected the tones produced.

What they did right (cont'd):

- * Described experiment: how set up, what they were looking for, and how the experiment could test that.
 - * Described what they found in clear, concise, mostly jargon-free language.
 - * When they couldn't avoid using technical terms, they carefully defined them.
 - * Described the implications of the results, and plans for future experiments -- again, in plain English.
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Why should scientists care about press conferences?

With the LHC coming online this year, there will be a great deal of media interest once data and results start rolling in.

There is a good chance that if you are involved with the LHC, you will be asked to speak to the media at some point, either via a press conference or direct interview.

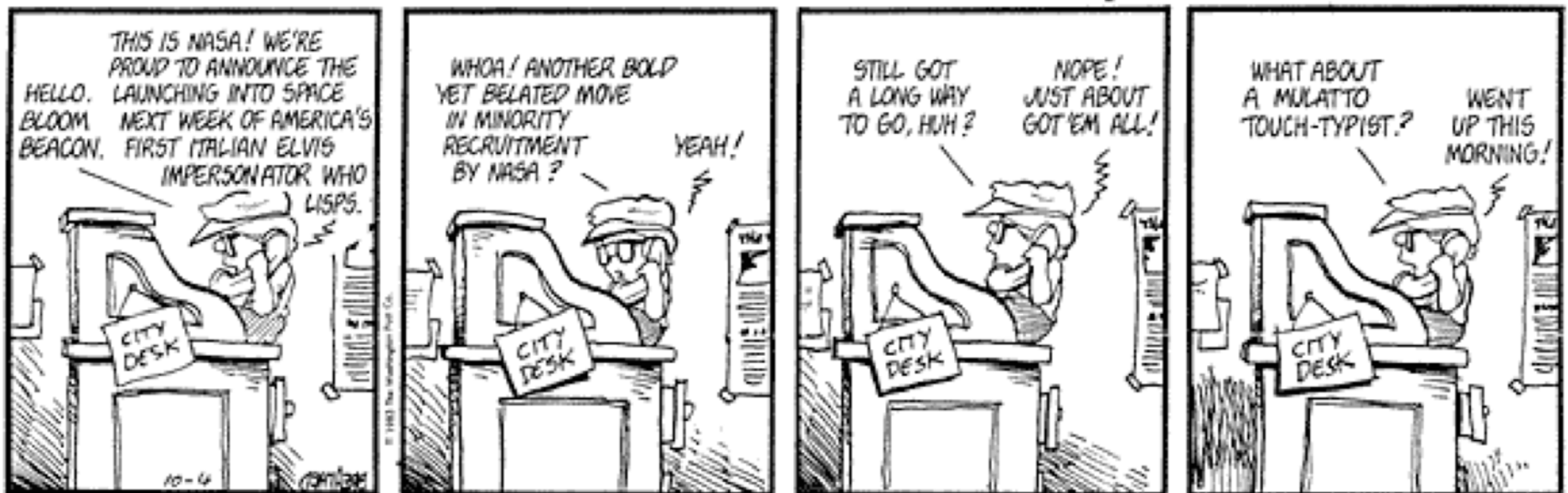
That includes theorists! We need you to provide key context for any discoveries made at the LHC.

Do you really need to hold a press conference?

- Would a press release suffice?
- Is there any real news? A reportable result?
- Is holding a press conference to your benefit?

BLOOM COUNTY

by Berke Breathed



So you've decided to hold a press conference:

DO THE PREP WORK:

- Who will be the speakers?
 - Length of presentation
 - Answer who, what, when, where, how, and why
 - Try to anticipate additional questions
 - What will be the technical level of the presentation?
 - What kinds of graphics/pictures can be used?
 - Will the press conference be taped?
 - Give the media sufficient advance notice
 - Assemble any pertinent handout materials
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What are reporters looking for? Narratives!

- * Timely, ie, have a news hook/tie-in with current events
 - * Broad in scope (affecting people directly or indirectly)
 - * Have an angle (local news? Nanotech industry? Public health and safety? A current event?)
 - * Reflect conflict -- like it or not, “conflict is the backbone of most reporting.” (Jason Bardi, AIP)
 - * Demonstrates human drama (compelling “characters”)
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Tips for presenters:

- * Be well-groomed (but don't be afraid to show some individual style). NOTE: TV has "special requirements."
 - * Stand or sit straight; don't jiggle, fidget, or swivel in a chair. Be aware of unconscious gestures.
 - * Decide on 2-3 main points as key messages
 - * Keep statements simple, brief and to the point.
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Tips for presenters (cont'd):

- * Avoid academic, bureaucratic or technical jargon.
 - * Avoid speculation; don't answer hypothetical questions.
 - * Avoid inflammatory statements.
 - * Don't be afraid of "dead air." Let the reporters try to fill the silence.
 - * Be confident, calm, courteous, and engaging; avoid speaking in a monotone.
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Tips for presenters (cont'd):.

- * Take time to breath before answering questions. It's a good idea to repeat or paraphrase questions before answering.
 - * Avoid saying "no comment." If you can't answer, explain why (policy, legal matter, national security).
 - * Don't say anything "off the record." The whole point of a press conference is to be on the record.
 - * Challenge loaded questions and correct major errors. Don't respond to the former as if they were legitimate.
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Tips for presenters (cont'd):

- * A good press conference is short and sweet. You should make your points in 10 minutes or less. Don't bore reporters with too many technical details.
 - * Further details should be provided via handout materials (press release, technical paper, graphics and/or photos), or during the Q&A.
 - * Graphics can be useful, but they must be good graphics that help convey information. A bad graphic can do more harm than good!
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Tips for Presenters (cont'd):

- * If someone asks a very detailed technical question, tell them you'll answer it after the press conference. Don't let them derail the level of discourse.
 - * Keep slides to a minimum: eg, no more than 3 slides for a 15-minute talk (one per 4-5 minutes of talk).
 - * Don't acknowledge every colleague during the news conference. List everyone in briefing materials, and/or on one last slide left on the screen during Q&A.
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And finally.....

* Rehearse, preferably via a mock press conference!



Some additional online resources:

“What Journalists Want: Nine Things for Scientists to Think about Before Talking to Reporters,” by Jason Bardi (AIP)

http://www.scripps.edu/newsandviews/e_20040621/print-science.html

From Fairer Science:

* Journalists' Advice to Researchers:

“KISI: Keep It Simple and Interesting”

<http://www.fairerscience.org/kisi.html>

* Researchers' Advice on Dealing with Journalists:

“KICI: Keep It Careful and Intelligent”

<http://www.fairerscience.org/kici.html>
