JUST DON'T QUOTE ME!

The Perils and Pitfalls
of Speaking to
the Press

Some Pet Peeves of Scientists:

* Misquotation

* Oversimplification (“dumbing down”) of the science

* Misrepresenting the science, eg, by hyping results

* Failing to convey subtle (but important) nuances

* Bad metaphors or analogies, eg “the god particle”

KEY QUESTION:

What can we work to change, and what is simply the nature of the Media-Beast?

Newsroom, The London Telegraph:

Newsroom, The New York Times:

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE:
Things Journalists Wish Scientists Understood:

Differences between media formats (newspaper, magazine, TV, radio, etc), and their corresponding different constraints

"News is a commodity; everyone's got the insta-deadline news. As soon as the research is in the journal, it's out there. As a magazine editor with a longer production timeframe, I can't print that. So [SciAm is] looking for stories that aren't just the simple shapshot, but trends, analysis, observations over a longer time scale -- something we can do well that others can't."

-- Mariette DiChristina-Gerosa,
Executive editor, **Scientific American**

Mainstream media does not have the luxury of long lead times; deadline pressures are intense!

"It's continual. There are no punctuation marks; it's 24/7. That's not so important to scientists, but it does frame how we have to write, adds to time pressures, and affects the time in which you can get something wrong."
-- Andrew Revkin, **New York Times**

POSSIBLE SOLUTION: Advance outreach. Scientists should be in touch with journalists before the day of a press release when there is less urgency and stress.

http://communicatingscience.aaas.org

Different professional standard practices

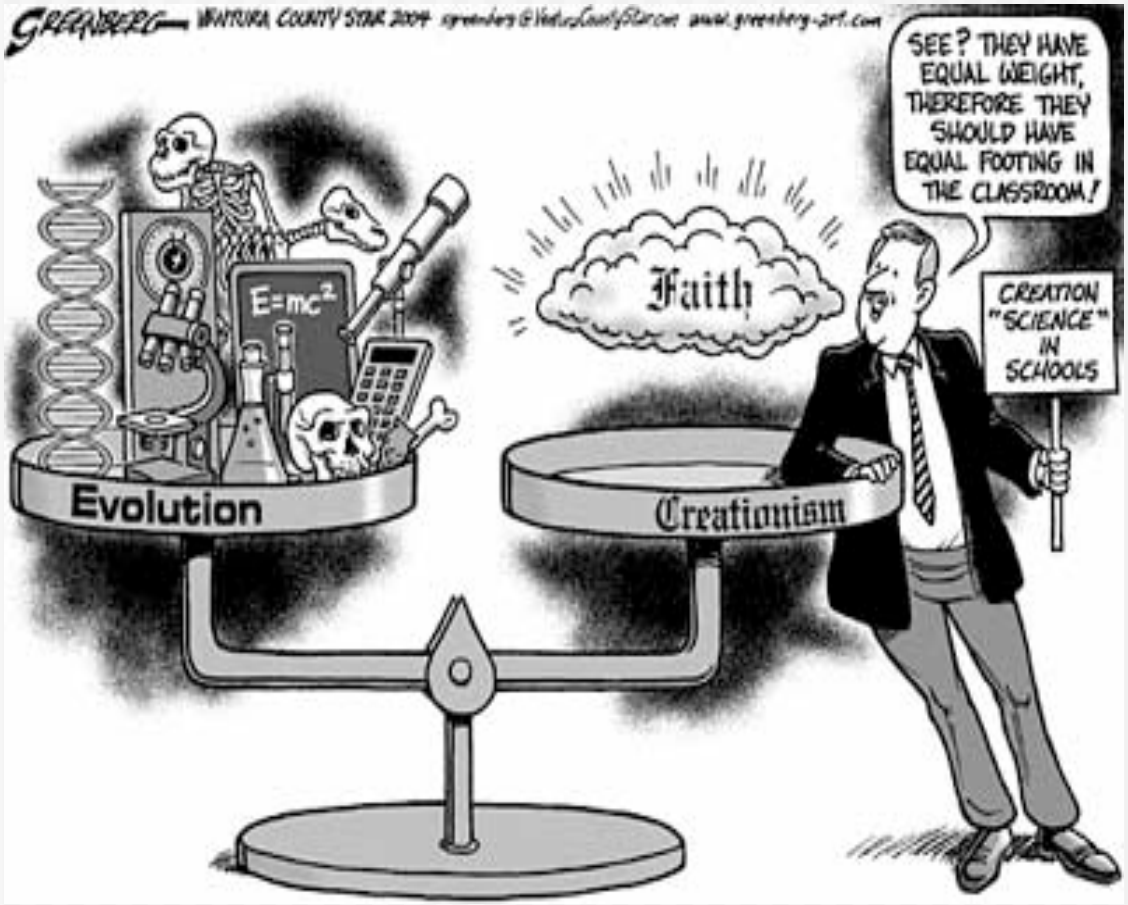
No, you cannot review the article before it goes to press.

Many scientists expect they will have this opportunity to check accuracy and make suggested changes. This is standard practice for academic journals and (often) the science trade press, eg, *Physics Today*.

BUT:

Journalistic practice says a reporter or editor can only check specific facts and quotes. Sources cannot read the entire article in advance and make changes.

The dreaded “B” word: BALANCE!



Balance is a fundamental tenet of journalism

Journalists are trained to present both sides to every story in the interests of fairly representing an issue. ALWAYS.

Balance is important! It can guard against too-credible reporting of scientific results

-- Cold fusion

BUT:

Some scientific issues are often presented as a “debate” when no real scientific debate actually exists

-- Global warming
-- Intelligent design

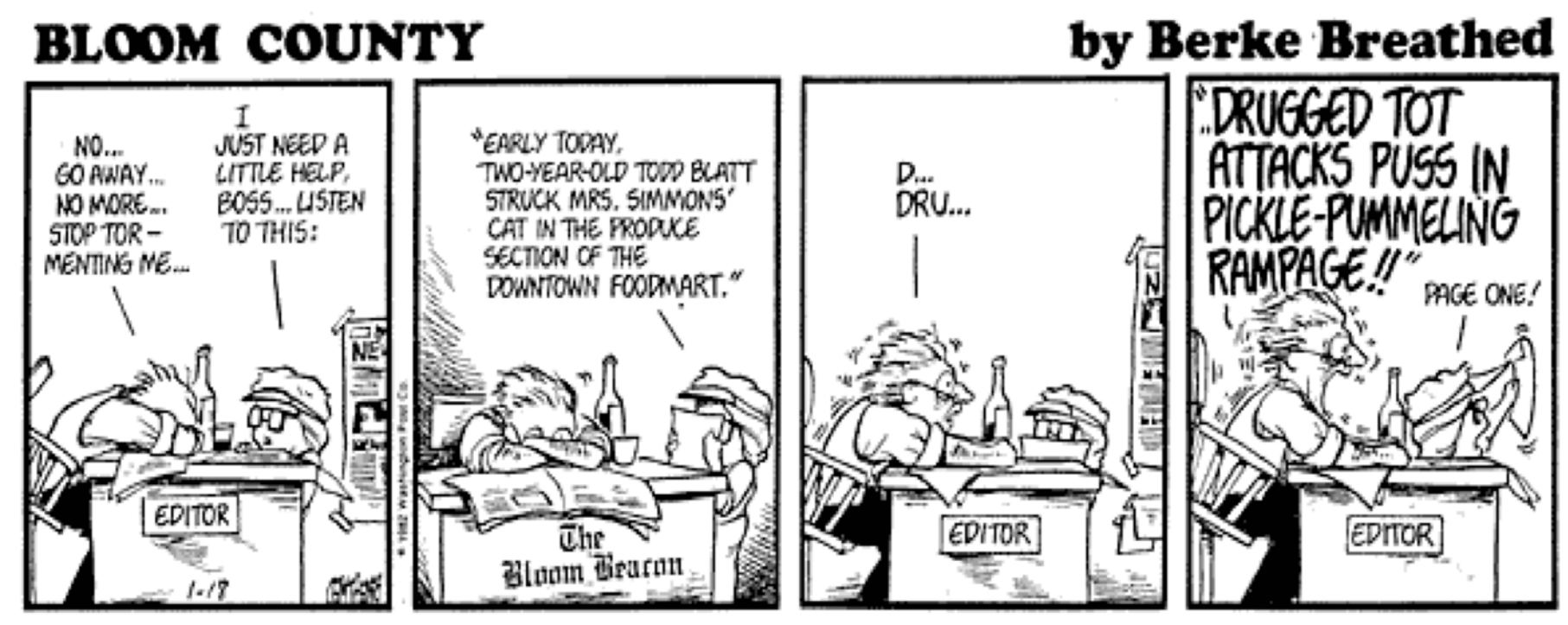
Scientists must recognize this fundamental principle of journalism so they will better understand how to counter it when necessary.

“Why don’t reporters tell the truth, instead of cherry-picking quotes to bolster their own biased point of view?”

Sometimes this is a valid complaint. BUT: It’s a rare and very bad reporter who deliberately sets out to misrepresent anyone in an article.

It IS a reporter’s job to shape an article into a strong narrative. There’s a big difference between lending structure and context to an article via a “point of view,” and skewing the facts to fit your pet theory.

Reporters do not write the headlines



There are lots of other folks involved in the process of bringing a science story to press:

Publisher
Editor in Chief
Section editors
Copy editors
Layout/Graphic designers
Photo editors
Headline and caption writers

“I never said that! And if I did, that’s not what I meant!”

Misquotation happens, despite everyone’s due diligence. Scientists aren’t misquoted any more, or less, than anyone else who is quoted in the press.

WHY IT HAPPENS:

* People don’t speak as well as they write. Some clean-up of quotes, a little editing, is inevitable. It’s not always done well, alas….

* Changes are often made at the very last minute. Every time something is changed, there’s the chance new errors will creep in.

Fortunately, the public has a very short memory, and are often paralyzed by not caring very much.

Who decides what stories get covered, and where stories get placed in a newspaper or magazine?

SOME BAD NEWS FOR SCIENCE:

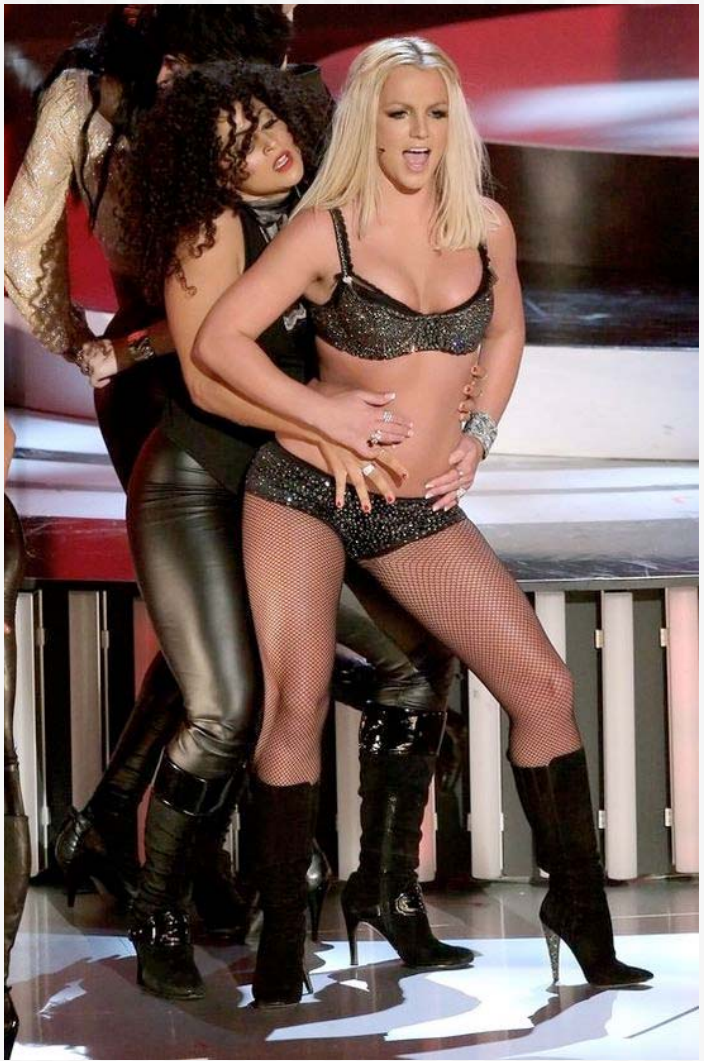
PEW's annual "state of the media" report.

For every 5 hours of cable TV news:

35 mins on campaigns and elections
26 mins of crime
12 mins of accidents and disasters
10 mins of celebrity and entertainment
1 min about science and technology

WE HAVE SEEN THE ENEMY:

Britney Spears' ongoing melodrama gets more media coverage than science and technology, the environment, education, and health care combined!



FINDING COMMON GROUND:

“Both of us -- scientist and journalist -- want to get a good story that’s clear and pleasing to our readers, so I think being understanding about each other’s limitations is most helpful of all.”

-- Mariette DiChristina-Gerosa (**SciAm**)