

SYLVIE COYAUD*

Women scientists and the media. The Agony Aunt's column

From astronomy to zoology, hundreds of ever more specialized disciplines compete for media space-time. And so they should, science is relevant. Or is it? Not for (male) editors who may deem a (male) Prime minister's sneeze more newsworthy than life on Mars. Scientists and science reporters often happen to be women, however, and could be supportive of each others. I'll take a leaf out of Olivia Judson's book, *Dr. Tatiana's Sex Advice to All Creation*, and offer a few tips.

Dear Aunt Sylvie,

Why does my lab never get any press coverage? This year, we have developed 1) a microwave system for remote deactivation of dirty bombs before launch; 2) diagnosing, repairing and self-repairing nanobio-bots that can mend anything from socks to washing-machines; 3) (omissis).

Our P.R. department issues detailed press releases with my cell phone number at the bottom, but nobody calls. Now even the FP6 requires evidence of effective communication to the public, and I'm desperate. No press cutting, no new funding, you know. What am I to do?

Maria, nanobio-physicist in distress

IRSUP (Innovative Research for the Solution of Urgent Problems) Lab., CNR, Rome

Attached: Full CV and bibliography

Dear Maria,

You are up against strong competition. Media prefer their scientists male, Nobelized, and white-haired, but don't just sit back and wait. First of all, choose trendier research: make bombs, don't deactivate them. Recent events have shown that the harder they fall, the more people watch TV, listen to the read or read the newspapers, and sales or advertising revenues soar. Mending robots aren't such a great idea either. Consumers are supposed to shop and drive the economic recovery. Socks aren't supposed to outlive the washing machine, and vice versa, or we'll never pull the European Union back from the brink.

Anyway, your situation is such that it can only get better. Here are some suggestions on how to solve your own problem.

- Have your P.R. dept. send ultrashort press releases. We journalists receive an average of fifty a day, twice as much as we did last year. If all were 4 pages long like yours and we were to read them, we'd have no time left for work. Put your phone number beneath the title, we rarely get any further.

- Send letters to journalists and to their editor when they publish glaring mistakes. You'll help correct the editor's misperception that scientists ignore the media. And you will show him (all editors are men) that, at least to some of their clientèle, science matters. Be patient, he is a slow learner, but he'll end up finding more space-time for it.

- Download your P.R. dept.'s mailing list. They are secretive about it, so get back to me if you need a reliable hacker. Have all the people in your group do media watching for a month, then select the best women. Ask any colleague of yours whom they have interviewed about her experience.

- Pick decent journalists in decent media, and tell them you appreciate their last feature (Be specific. We all have our bad days and know it. We might suspect you've hidden an agenda under the compliments). If you're too much of a lady to inform them about your

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own research, call them to discuss new developments in your field, suggest other women's work they should keep up with. If they are competent, they'll ask about what you are doing. In short, test them. And when you find they are more intelligent than you first thought - don't deny it, Maria dear, you were overheard - trust them.

- When they'll report about your lab, your boss and other male colleagues won't like it. Prepare for retaliation.

*Best wishes,
Aunt Sylvie*

Post-scriptum: Can't you make your nanobio-bots perform non invasive face-lifts as well? That would be a hit.

Bibliografia

JUDSON, O. (2002, 2004), *Dr. Tatiana's Sex Advice to All Creation*, London, Holt & Company, Milan, Mondadori.