Standing up **for science**

When trying to publish your research in scientific journals you are faced with the challenge that your work needs to be novel, engaging, and ideally 'sexy'. The same usually goes for publishing stories in the media. So why is there still a massive disparity in the way that researchers report a scientific finding and the way the media does?

Since starting my PhD I have become acutely aware of just how much scientific research may be distorted in the media. This means that members of the general public are being exposed to numerous false and unsupported claims, but are not necessarily equipped to spot them or verify the credibility themselves. With scientific research being my chosen career, this is less than ideal and it has spurred me to get involved in tackling the issue of how science is reported in the media. I applied for the 'Standing Up for Science Media Workshop' in Glasgow which, having read the workshop description, sounded perfect for someone like me who had a few concerns but no real understanding of how the problems occur and how to act upon them. I was not disappointed.

The workshop began with a panel of scientists whose research had been discussed in the media. It was very enlightening to receive feedback from people who had first-hand experience of their own work being reported incorrectly, and how this had affected them personally and their careers. Alongside this, the panellists gave us advice on what to do and what to avoid doing if contacted about our work and how our work could be misconstrued. Amidst these daunting tales we were still encouraged to contact the media with our own research but to keep in mind any ways that our work could be incorrectly interpreted.

Our next panel consisted of two science journalists, and for me this section was quite an eye-opener. I was given the impression that one of the journalists was completely uninterested in the field of science. I should not be surprised, selling newspapers is a business after all, but I was certainly disheartened to see and hear how different the approach of science journalists seems to be to science writing. The differences are not just in writing but also in the way research is carried out. In the case of science journalism, it seems that there is no time to research thoroughly when you have a deadline (yet somehow scientists seem to manage it). I believe that science journalism, like science writing, should be a genuine endeavour to inform others of scientific developments and advancements, instead of a way to 'hook' readers by blowing things out of proportion and misleading them. But maybe this is unrealistic, though it should not be. Science can be interesting on its own, without having to pad it out with exaggerations and bold claims; you just need to be able to write well. Journalists should hopefully be able to do this.

The final session gave us students the opportunity to ask any burning questions to the panel of a media relations officer, a Voice of Young Science representative, and the Sense About Science programme manager. My peers' questions and concerns, I felt that none of them wanted to contact the media, not because they felt that their work was unworthy but because of the potential whiplash effect from the media and the effect that this could have on future employment and collaborations. Mainstream media does not seem to work in favour of researchers. Nevertheless, we were advised on how we could support the accurate representation of science in the media and contribute our own experiences, knowledge, and findings to the scientific community and general public.

Since attending this workshop I frequent the 'Sense About Science' and 'Ask for Evidence' webpages, and find them fantastically informative and interesting reads. They show that people are beginning to confront both mainstream media and advertising campaigns on their inaccurate and misleading reports. This is encouraging, and I am hopeful that the launch of 'Ask for Evidence' will gather momentum over the coming months and years to tackle the abundant false claims made on a regular basis. I also hope that I can contribute to and be a part of the change. And I hope that others do too.

Georgina Glaser
PhD Candidate, School of Biology
***E**: glg2@st-andrews.ac.uk*

Postgraduates who are interested in sharing their research with the media are welcome to contact the University's Press Office who can provide support and advice.
T: (01334 46) 2530
E: proffice@st-andrews.ac.uk