

Role of Media in Propagating Science

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This morning I would like to speak to you briefly about the role of media in propagating science, as a talked-about topic. Queena was telling me as I sat down with the panel this morning that, "you know Cheche, you are the only non-scientist," and I said yes, that is why it is so intimidating because when I was growing up and at school, I did not like Science. And the aversion really comes from a wrong perception. I have only come to appreciate science recently.

Science is around us

When you speak of science and scientist, the immediate reaction of people is '*Aah, mga nerds!*', 'they are nerds, you can't talk to them in normal people-speak, you have to talk in science geek language, you can't communicate with them, they belong to another stratosphere that does not belong here on earth, they are flying somewhere up there. We liken them to vegetables; you know it is good for you, but we rather not take it. We just go for the dessert: it is more frothy, it is sweeter, it tastes better, and is also a lot more attractive than vegetables. One time I was with some friends from TOWNS, they were scientists from Los Baños and they were saying, "*Cheche, tulungan mo naman kami to try and popularize science*" and I asked a stupid question, "What is science?" Their answer to me was so appropriate and really put me in my place. They said, "Everything around you is science." I said, everything? And I looked around and said yes, everything. The light bulb, the making of the rug, the circulation of the blood in my body, the reason my brain does not work. I don't know if it also includes why the economy is so artificially inflated or why politicians behave the way they do or why elections turn out in the Philippines the way they do. Maybe there is a scientific answer to that.

But in today's atmosphere you begin to wonder if science as a subject for media can be made more attractive, in fact, hopefully as attractive

as the gossip stories are on TV, the way on *Star Patrol* or *Star news*, or *Chikaminute* as watched and waited for by people maybe including yourselves. Since this is a scientific meeting, I will not embarrass you by asking you if you watch the news for *Star Patrol*, or for *Chikaminute*. How many of us watch the news for this reason? You don't have to raise your hands, just say yes at the back of your mind. The reason is--because there is a certain special quality that these two sections of the news bring which the rest of the news have not been able to mimic with as much success.

The new media

But before going to that, I would like to give a brief picture of the nature of media today. Today, we are faced with two kinds of media; one is called traditional media or trimedia: print, radio, and television. They have been re-classified by today's newer forms and referred to as old media. They are not as exciting as the current and still evolving "new forms" that now challenge the traditional forms we grew up with. Of the three, print radio, and television, the most credible is television and the most sought after as career paths when you go into teaching is television. As the Canadian communication guru Marshall McLuhan said, "the medium is the message." It is the mesmerizing kind of allure that television has. Today, the ownership of television sets is at 96% of all households in Metro Manila, and this translates to 2.2 million homes. In urban Philippines which includes the major cities, 85% of households or 6 million homes have television sets. In Luzon minus Metro Manila, it is 77%, and in the Visayas, 83%. Critics tell us that we have now moved away from the age of information to the age of empowerment.

We know about the web and all its wonders. From emails to blogs to social networking sites like facebook, Twitter and Multiply. From podcasting to MP3 to text messaging to uploading videos of your favorite pet and conducting online research on any topic including the basics of how to zap a pimple on your face. "How to zap a zit?" This is one of the most watched videos on YouTube, Can you imagine? I do not know if there is a scientific connection there, but it is the most watched YouTube video. To google means to do instant research for students who have a paper due tomorrow or maybe 12 hours from now.

We know from observation and now officially recognized is the fact that the Philippines has been named the texting capital of the world. There are 45 million cell phones now in circulation in the Philippines. That is more than half of our population. There are 1 billion texts that are sent out everyday. 1 billion. I do not know what are inside those texts but 1 billion of texts is a lot of news going around.

The Internet population is described as urban, young, and professional,

and of the 1.5 billion users, 45% belongs to the age group of 12–19 years old. I was quite impressed by this figure because it shows that the Internet is really a venue that the young are now calling their own. While of the 40–60 age group where some of us here belong to, although some of us are in great denial, there are only 8% of us who use the Internet, whereas with the younger kids 12–19 years old, a good 45% are into it on a constant daily basis. You have seen people who are constantly on their telephones including ourselves today, and you have seen people who check their websites, blogs, emails, facebook, twitter, and multiply accounts on a daily basis without fail. The buzzword today is convergence, whereas in the past when I was growing up with television, we used to depend on a schedule. When is this cartoon coming up, when is this news coming up. Today, that is no longer true. Statistics show us that there are less people watching television today. It is not because there are less people who watch the shows, but because they watch video on demand. Young people or those who are savvy with the Internet or computers, watch television shows when they want to, and in the manner they want to watch it. Some can watch it on the Internet; others can watch it on their iPod while travelling from one place to the next. Watching of television is no longer predetermined by where your television is sitting; whether it is in living room, your bedroom, or your bathroom, is of no consequence. You can now take it to your car and you can take it to bed right on your iPod.

“Prosumers” vs consumers

The young people today are not called consumers; they are now called “prosumers” and have access to more options than they ever did in the past. They can produce their own content. They can produce their own television shows if they want to. If you check all of the websites, YouTube most especially, there are many videos uploaded by young people who choose the topics they want to talk about, to do it in the way they want to do it and they do it without the help of large cameras which we in the industry are so used to operating. In the past, we used to walk around with all those huge bulky cameras, with microphones with all kinds of mixers. Today, one little camera like this one in front of me can take shots, without intruding within the private space of those who they are trying to shoot.

The young people are comfortable with all the new technologies, computers, websites, videocams, digicams, cell phones, and iPods. They are not intimidated by the medium. There are many of us, or many of our older members of the family who will not touch a computer even if you taught them how to use it. My own mother, who is very media savvy, refused to touch a computer. She loved to write and she loved to express herself, but when I was trying to teach her how to use a computer, she said,

“No Cheche, I can’t, I’d rather use a typewriter.” So the movement into the new media has been so swift that today when you ask young people if they have seen a typewriter, some will tell you that they have not. In our own office for example, we have no more typewriters, and when one young intern who joined us recently said “is that for the museum?” I thought, my goodness this was just in use 15 years ago and this kid cannot recognize a typewriter anymore.

Bringing science to its target audience

The young people today have more avenues for self expression; they are more open to new ideas and ways of doing things. They are no longer tied to the ways of television sets. However, I would like to posit here that even with the new media, the traditional forms of media, radio, television, and print, are still the agenda setters in this country. The agendas for news, the agendas for what are talk about are still set by the traditional media which brings me to the point of where science comes in.

In the beginning, I said that science has the general impression of being only for nerds, only for people who are equipped with PhD’s and teach at the university. Earlier, UP President Roman said that they are trying to remove from the mindset of the academics the idea of not mixing in with business persons because they have totally different objectives in life. In today’s world because of the globalization efforts and because media is now an all- pervasive partner, if you will, in everything that they do, it is necessary for the idea of science to come in to the mainstream of media. How do we do this?

Target audience and choice of media

If media has the impression that science is too high-brow, too unreachable, “*di maabot, di maintindihan,*” what can be done about this? The first thing we have to do is to identify the target audience. Who are we trying to reach? What are these groups that we are trying to get interested in what we have to say? Once we have identified who we’re trying to reach then we choose the medium that accesses these target audiences. Not all media forms reach specific target groups that we want to address. Second, we have to bring down science from its very high ivory tower where it now stands, where everybody thinks that the only people who can become scientists are those who top their classes.

Speak the language that connects

I understand today that, if science is broken down into its lowest

common denominator, it can be as interesting and as sexy as gossip in entertainment news. I always asked the question “Why is it that the break-up of Ruffa and Ylmaz can stay in the news for a week and a half? Why is it that everybody in this room knows every bloody detail of that break-up? But nobody or only a few of us know about ethical questions that our science leaders spoke so eloquently about. Why is it that everybody knows what Paris Hilton wore, when she came out of prison?” But not everybody knows, for example that Dr. Toto Olivera was awarded by the Harvard Foundation as Scientist of the World of the Year in 2007. Why is that so? Is it because it is boring news? Is it because it is not universal in theme or is it because we don’t package it like dessert, in the same way Ruffa and Ylmaz, although they have no personal effect on our lives, we know every detail about it.

In the media today we talk about what we call sensational journalism. In the past, it used to be a bad word. If you sensationalize, it means you are not telling the truth. You’re exaggerating. But many people argue that the reason stories like showbiz stories rate so highly and are watched so intently is precisely because they are sensational. They hasten to add that sensational journalism is not necessarily bad. They define sensational journalism as focusing on the details and blowing it up, making something small big, but of necessity, sticking to the facts. So if in one showbiz news item, somebody was seen on a cell phone kissing somebody else, it is blown out for all its worth. It is talked about in great detail. What are the emotional effects of being seen kissing somebody on a cell phone. Are there political implications for this act of kissing somebody who was not your husband? What is the physical position of the person when he was kissing the other mouth? When they try to exaggerate little details and make a story out of it they call it sensationalism. But the effect is everybody gets curious, everybody gets interested and everybody watches. And those of us who are against sensational journalism, rail against it and say these should never happen in media. But sometimes the question that should be asked is “does the message get across? And if it answers yes, sometimes the solution should be taken as a way of getting the message across.

So if science is taught as a boring subject, we should identify our target audience, bring it down from its ivory tower, and bring it to its lowest common denominator. Something that Juan de la Cruz can answer, not only Dr. De la Cruz but Juan the carpenter. It is important to speak in the language that connects. If we use scientific words or scientific language, we will put people to sleep. But if we use a language that people will understand, whether it is rap, whether it is rock, whether it is geek speak or sward speak, whatever it is to reach your audience, you have to speak the language that they understand.

Break down big concepts to chewable size

Then big concepts that could be broken down into chewable parts, parts that people can digest easily, not big stuff but small stuff. Because that is what sensational journalism is all about. Talking about small bits and blowing it up so people will remember what you are saying. Package it to look like dessert, so that people are attracted to it and when they bite to it, they will realize “*ay, vegetables pala ito*”, but it is already in their mouth. And that is the first objective, get into the consciousness of your target audience. Once they bite into it, they have no choice, they can’t spit it out. But initially if they don’t go into the dessert you won’t get it into the mouth. Keep the message short and simple. Once you keep the message short and simple, its easier to digest, it will sick to their minds.

Filipino role models for science

I would like to present now a sample of a story that we did last night on the Probe Team. This is not exactly dessert, but it is a short message that I like to demonstrate. [Note: A 3-4 min video clip by the Probe Team on Dr. Baldomero Olivera was shown at this point.]

The objective of the piece was to talk about these new discoveries, but more importantly, we wanted to show our audiences that there are Filipino role models, that there are heroes of science that we can be proud of, that the world recognizes as first class/first world scientists.

Targeting the youth as specific audience

Some of the suggestions that we have for making science chewable and eatable for the general public is of course to make it as interesting for the public as entertainment news is. And the way to do this for example is to target specific audiences. My personal suggestion is to go into the youth as a specific target audience because that is where interest in science begins.

During the last campaign, we had occasion to ask some of our would-be candidates what they would do to make science a priority project for the Philippines, because we are lagging behind. And some of them focused on the educational system as the main source of engendering science an interesting topic. But I posit here, you must link up with media to be able to make these stories interesting and more sellable as items that they can use.

One specific situation I have, targeting the youth, is to make them interested using new media as an outlet for their creative uses even if they do not have a specific interest in science. It might do well for the academy

for example to sponsor a contest which is open to all young people to produce videos for the internet on specific topics that they are interested in, and to provide role models for would-be students who would like to go into science that they can identify with, preferably young role models that they can say, "*kaya kong gawin yan.*" Because when they think of scientists or when they think of science, they always think of the older learned scientists. If you can get a young, hip-looking scientist, then I think it will make the case much better for science. It would be great if at the future time, young people will say, "*ano gusto mo maging?*" The answer could be, "*paglaki ko, gusto kong maging scientist kagaya ni...*" a scientist role model. In the same way people will say, "*paglaki ko gusto ko maging artista kagaya ni Paris Hilton.*"

Let us get better role models because there are better things to do in this country than become a movie star. To end, I would like to show you a video that I think is the kind of video that should be produced on scientific topics, making it more interesting, more palatable for everyone.[At this point, a short music video (Bloodstream, AB+) was shown.]

Thank you very much. I hope science would be as sexy as that.

About the Author: Ms. Cecilia "Cheche" Lim Lazaro is the founding President of Probe Productions Inc. (www.probetv.com) host and executive producer of award-winning TV programs such as The Probe Team, 5 and Up, Cheche Lazaro Presents and Gameplan. From 1972 to 2000, Ms. Lazaro was Associate Professor at the UP College of Mass Communication. She can be contacted at 922-9273.