

The Seven Deadly Sins of the Science Press Officer...

... and How to Avoid Them

Panelists

- Terry Devitt, University of Wisconsin – Moderator/Organizer
- A'ndrea Messer, Penn State University
- David Harris, Independent Science Communication Designer
- Deborah Blum, University of Wisconsin

Our Mission Today

- Inform practice
- Reflect on journalist/press officer dynamic
- Show examples of unhealthy practices
- Identify alternative practices/resources
- Identify ways to avoid a showdown
- Pull back the press officer curtain

The Original Seven Deadly Sins

- Wrath
- Greed
- Sloth
- Pride
- Lust
- Envy
- Gluttony



Survey

- Online survey Sept. 6-30, 2011
- To get a copy of the final report:
td@nasw.org
- Visit The Enlightened PIO blog:
<http://www.theenlightenedpio.com/>

Survey Results

- 79 Respondents – 61 percent self-identify as journalists, 35 percent as press officers, 13 percent as other
- 20 percent < 5 years experience
- 19 percent ~ 5-10 years experience
- 18 percent ~ 10-15 years experience
- 28 percent ~ 20-30 years experience

Survey Results

- Where are you most likely to find sinners?
Corporations, government agencies, hospitals
- Where are they less likely to be?
Universities, foundations

Survey Results

What are the big sins?

- Timeliness – not responding to journalists e-mails, phone calls; not being “time responsive” regarding deadlines; source availability
- Control – trying to manage as opposed to facilitating the source/journalist interaction, e.g. sitting in on interviews, unrealistic demands
- Story/news judgment – failure to know implications, context of “news,” overselling, hype

Survey Results

What are the big sins?

- Misrepresentation – promising an exclusive and then being inclusive; not following through on promises of help for access to information or sources
- “Failure of transparency,” in the context of negative stories; “willful misrepresentation”

Survey Results

What are the big sins?

- Sending too many crappy, poorly written, jargony, acronym- and cliché riddled, out of date, simplistic, non-contextual press releases
- Bugging reporters with calls or unsolicited releases/pitches
- Assuming the reporter knows too much or too little

Survey Results

What are the big sins?

- Not working with researcher so they're comfortable with a reporter's questions
- "Teaching scientists to mistrust all reporters."
- Pitching to multiple journalists without saying that's what you're doing
- Not knowing your journalist audience/publication

Survey Results

What are the big sins?

- Not being ready with images, manuscripts, background
- Giving scientist sources too much control over copy

Things a press officer can do to avoid hot water

- Be honest and forthcoming
- Respect deadlines
- Know that your actions affect your institution's credibility and reputation
- Write clearly
- Ask questions
- Don't promise what you can't deliver

Things a press officer can do to avoid hot water

- Be genuinely helpful – find a source or a picture in a hurry, provide as much advance warning as possible
- Help your scientist sources help journalists
- Get to know science journalists and their particular needs
- Know that a journalist's goals are not the same as yours

Things a press officer can do to avoid hot water

- Know your institution
- Strive to create an atmosphere of openness and transparency
- Be skeptical about the studies you choose to write about, know the limits of the research
- Don't try to manage the process of making news
- Plan for contingencies

Things a press officer can do to avoid hot water

- Make sure your stories are good ones
- "Read Dennis Meredith's book and listen to him whenever possible"

What's wrong with this picture?

Embargo Watch

Keeping an eye on how scientific information embargoes affect n

Quid pro quo? American Cetacean Society tells freelancer he can only have a press pass if it's a "mutually beneficial relationship"

with 19 comments

[Erik Vance](#), a freelancer in the Bay Area, is pissed. Witness a [tweet he sent earlier today](#):

“ Denied press pass by the Cetacean Society 'cause I refused to guarantee them a story. Most disturbing line: "What are you gonna do for me?"

Vance just wanted to cover the [American Cetacean Society's 2010 conference](#), which begins tomorrow. (Cetaceans, for those of you who may not know, are whales, dolphins, and porpoises.) I asked him for some context for the tweet. Here's his email to me:

“ Ivan, I am so angry I could just pop. Not just because of my little ego, but because of what it means.

It began yesterday when I called the American Cetacean Society about a press pass for their upcoming conference in Monterey, CA. The [executive director] ED [Cheryl McCormick] of the organization essentially said to me if I can't guarantee a positive story in the paper then I'm not getting a pass. I asked her to clarify and then she was more explicit. "What are you going to do for me?" "I am a businesswoman, here" and "This needs to be a mutually beneficial relationship." I told



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Embargo Watch

Keeping an eye on how scientific information

How to demonstrate you're not about transparency — and piss off reporters — as a PIO

with 171 comments

Ed Yong just wanted to [look at the data](#).

This past weekend, he found an [intriguing embargoed press release about mummy toes and prosthetics](#), and realized that the "study" to which the release referred was actually just a [Perspective in *The Lancet*](#). When he emailed the press officer who'd written the release, he learned that the actual data weren't yet published, but that the Perspective was "peer reviewed using the data."

Readers of this blog are probably familiar with Yong, science blogger extraordinaire. He writes the extremely popular — and [award-winning](#), for good reason — [Not Exactly Rocket Science](#) blog at [Discover](#).

So it won't be a surprise to learn that Yong wanted more information. He understood that there wasn't a typical peer-reviewed study published yet, but he wanted to at least speak with the author, whose contact information didn't seem to be anywhere on the web. So he asked the press officer for those details.

That's where the ridiculousness started, as [Yong relates on his Posterous](#). The PIO, the University of Manchester's Aeron Haworth, responded:

“ I think you have all you need for a blog.



Ed Yong, courtesy Ed Yong

Resources

- Explaining Research and its appendix, Working With Public Information Officers – Dennis Meredith
- The Enlightened PIO Book & Blog
<http://www.theenlightenedpio.com/>
- Embargo Watch – Ivan Oransky
<http://embargowatch.wordpress.com/>
- NASW list servs