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Hard lessons learned . . .

Posted on May 12th, 2010 by earlehollland

The lessons best remembered are often those that hurt worst . . .

And when it comes to scientists misjudging the importance of how they deal with the news media, those experiences can be painful indeed. An anthropologist at a North Carolina university just got a crash course on how quickly minor potholes in the road can become giant crevasses.

Professor [Gwen Robbins](#) is a bioarcheologist at [Appalachian State University](#) and a specialist in analyzing bones. For several years, she and colleagues have been studying a camp site in Utah where part of the famous [Donner party](#) was trapped while on their way west. Before they were ultimately rescued, survivors said that they had resorted to eating flesh from some of their dead comrades in a desperate struggle to survive.

Among the near-universal taboos throughout most of human culture, cannibalism is at the top of the list.



So it was big news when on April 14,

Robbins' university sent out [a news release](#) about her research that would be presented at the annual meeting of the [American Association of Physical Anthropologists](#). The headline on the news release read, "*Professor's research finds no evidence of cannibalism at Donner party campsite.*" Given that this defied the century-old story of the pioneer's struggle, the news media quickly picked up the story.

Newspapers immediately ran with headlines like "*Donner party cannibalism claims questioned,*" "*Oops! Donner party gets apology,*" "*Donners ate dog, maybe not people,*" and "*Donner party not cannibals.*"

The problem was that none of these stories really reflected [Robbin's actual research](#). And predictably, within a couple of weeks, historians and other experts jumped at the chance to correct these errors and, as usually happens, the researcher and her work were called into question.

The second wave of stories was definitive: "*Donner party cannibalism – it's still true,*" and "*Researcher: Donner party did cannibalize the dead after all.*"

The chain of events that fostered the initial announcement, the news coverage, the dissent from other experts and ultimately more news coverage, was sadly predictable and it occurs often enough that scientists should pay attention lest they find themselves in a similar storm.

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Robbins' research was being presented at a national meeting and that was the "news hook" that the university hoped to catch media coverage. She said that she had drafted a news release, checked it with her research partners and forwarded that to their public affairs office.

She said a writer in that press office rewrote the draft to spice it up a bit and sent it back to Robbins for her review. But the researcher was rushing to leave for the New Mexico meeting and "I did not look it over carefully, and so it is my fault if it was misleading," she said in an email message.



"Frankly, I was wrongly focused on my own work and on my annual meeting and not on the PR. I am afraid I was naive and I honestly did not think the media would be interested in the story because they covered it extensively when the preliminary results were released in 2006. I thought it would be a local story and did not take the care I should have with it.

"I will not make that mistake again."

It's hard not to feel sympathetic to Robbins. The story broke while she was at the meeting conferring with colleagues. Afterwards, she said she came down with the flu, which then was passed to her kids and by the time she had recouped, things had taken on a life of their own.

She and her colleagues prepared a revised, and corrected, **second news release** and that was distributed by April 23 but by then, the damage was largely done.

What's sad about this case is that Robbins' scientific report on her research was accurate, with the appropriate set of caveats which would allow readers to know specifically what her findings meant – and equally important, what they were not.

She had looked at one of at least two campsites. There were more than 16,000 bone fragments, from which, only 85 could be analyzed. She qualified her conclusions by saying the lack of evidence of cannibalism at the site was based on an assumption that the trapped settlers would have treated human meat the same as they did other game – if they handled the meat differently, the conclusions wouldn't apply.

In essence, she had found no evidence that cannibalism took place at that one campsite. But as scientists are quick to remind the lay public, the "*absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.*"

The lessons from this episode are clear:

- Revisions to Robbin's draft news release were made based on increasing news interest, without the caution and care that science writers usually bring to the process;
- Robbins considered the news release a minor aspect and failed to review it closely, enabling the news media's misinterpretation of her findings;
- And in the midst of the initial flood of coverage, she failed to use media inquiries as a chance to insure they got the story right.

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To her credit, Robbins is moving forward.

“One lesson I can take from all this is that I should not be so narrowly focused on my own research and teaching that I neglect to communicate properly with the [news] media.

“If [this episode] yields insights that improve the dissemination of research then at least something good will have come from all of this.”__Earle Holland



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8 Responses to “Hard lessons learned . . .”

Kenneth Dunn // May 12, 2010 at 3:54 pm

The failure in this event cannot be put entirely on Ms Robbins. Headline writers need to be admonished against distorting the content of a story. Furthermore, journalists need to check their facts. Case in point, Mr Holland... the Donner Party was trapped in the Sierra Nevada of California (not Utah). The story is over 160 years old – much more than a century old.

In the end, the reading public are the losers when researchers and reporters rush to tickle their own self interest.

[earleholland](#) // May 12, 2010 at 4:29 pm

Mr. Dunn is, of course, correct that the camps the party were trapped at were in California and not in Utah — mea culpa. And while it was 160 years or so ago, the use of “century-old” is journalistically acceptable in this case. Thanks for the feedback.

[John D](#) // May 19, 2010 at 7:30 pm

I just arrived from google as I was searching for information about Professor Gwen Robbins background. Very interesting article.

[Stephanie S](#) // May 23, 2010 at 2:19 pm

All good points you have made here, Earle. When another writer, especially a PR writer, tells a scientist that he or she wants to “spice up” the work, it’s important to remember that not all spices are equal nor appropriate for every “dish.” Whenever anyone, including an editor, changes my words, I want to see every dot and tittle whether the final work is going to be read by the general public or a committee of peers. A

scientist needs to be even more cautious, especially in this day and age when whole theories like global warming can be denigrated so thoroughly by the press. As for headlines, there are those "Readers Digest Condensed" readers who actually form opinions by quickly reading headlines and, of course, the more sensational, the better. Headlines are fickle and meant to seduce, not to inform.

[Teacher](#) // Jun 9, 2010 at 2:28 pm

it amazes me constantly how the media can take such a simple story and twist it into whatever they want based on what they think will catch attention. Taking time to read through a story that someone else is going to put your name on seems so obvious.. i can understand what Mrs. Robbins was thinking .. skimming through .. making sure the key points were there.. its too bad though.. good article.

[Kaushik Biswas](#) // Jun 10, 2010 at 6:32 pm

How true! "The lessons best remembered are often those that hurt worst" You're absolutely right. We learn, because we remember the pain.

[Sleep Aid](#) // Jul 6, 2010 at 5:06 pm

The truth hurts! We as humans always remember the one's that hurt.....Great article!

[Billy](#) // Oct 4, 2011 at 6:01 pm

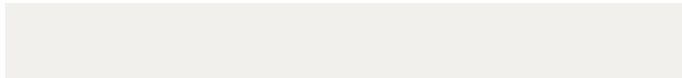
The media will con volute – you must take this into account when speaking on any topic, even scientific. You'd think they would be rational and only report the facts, but just look at politics in the US today...

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« It's about time . . . If only life were fiction . . . »

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