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Book Review: Journalism, Science and Society, by Martin W. Bauer and Massimiano Bucchi (Eds.). New York: Routledge, 2007. 286 pp

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Bob Dylan may have written *The Times They Are a-Changin'* nearly 50 years ago, but the sentiment rings as true in science communication today as it did for society in 1964. Audiences demonstrably are shifting away from print (especially audiences for whom science and technology already are low-salience issues) toward multimedia browsing. Even before the current economic freefall, newsrooms were shedding full-time science journalists like trees drop leaves in autumn, reflecting shrinking news holes and declining ad revenues tied to science. Freelance science writers found it hard enough to eke out a living before the influx of newly unemployed former journalists in the open market. Citizen journalism seems poised to fill the resulting void in science and technology news, despite concerns about credibility and authority.

These are the topics that form the buzz whenever science writers and science public relations (PR) practitioners gather. They are our touchstone issues, and clearly, they are issues for which a critical and insightful review would be a welcome read. Bauer and Bucchi's *Journalism, Science and Society* is such a welcome addition to the bookshelf, albeit rather piecemeal and seemingly scattershot through only a few of the threads in these discussions.

I should point out up front that Bauer and Bucchi are well aware that theirs is a perspective rather more limited than the title of the book would suggest; they acknowledge, for example, that the book is almost exclusively weighted toward print journalism, that it treats only "normal" journalism and PR rather than crisis or controversial situations or issues, and that it neglects science writing or advocacy aimed at audiences other than the broad public. Clearly, an enterprise scratching its collective head about nonprint science writing, reporting scientific controversy, and the role of journalism and PR in informing policy and politics will find little in *Journalism, Science and Society* to commend their attention.

Nevertheless, there are important discussions in this book that offer valuable insight into the issues facing science communication today. The book falls neatly into three sections: the historical underpinnings of the culture of science journalism and how the field might play out in the near future; the increasingly convoluted interdigitation of science advocacy and

science journalism, told from the perspectives of journalism and PR practice; and the way these issues translate into disparate ethnographic domains.

Journalism, Science and Society's strongest suit is in historical analysis, where the scholarship is generally impeccable and provides a very compelling argument that the dynamic tension between news standards of sensationalism and objectivism—and how these standards are negotiated among scientists, science writers, and science editors and publishers—is hardly a new concern. Perhaps the most enjoyable piece in this part of the collection is Jeff Hughes's analysis of correspondence between science writer James Gerald Crowther and his editors at the *Manchester Guardian*. Slightly adjusted for idioms of speech (these letters were written in the 1920s and 1930s), the editorial pleas to cover things the *Guardian's* readers were interested in—"insects and water"—and Crowther's obdurate refusal to write simple pieces about simple things, would ring true in newsrooms across the world today. Some things, it appears, really do not change. Similarly, Bauer and Gregory's fine dissection of the tides in the intensity and framing of science news coverage in post-War Britain provides a logic for understanding how marketing and promotion gradually have come to inform old-school journalistic modes of science writing; their analysis dovetails nicely with the next chapter by Bucchi and Massolini, who argue that science reporting has become dominated by biomedicine to the exclusion of other disciplines in post-War Italy and that PR activities have led to the rise of single-source, "institutionalized" science reporting in contemporary media.

The book's section on science writing proper, subtitled "Practitioner's Perspectives," is perhaps the least illuminating collection, consisting as it does primarily of anecdotal recollections from print journalists. Each is interesting reading in its own right, but seldom do any of the individual authors tie the personal narrative to overarching theoretical concerns or try to analyze personal experience in the light of communication scholarship. And unlike Hughes's dissection of Crowther's correspondence, the authors here lack the objective distance to truly place their own work in historical context. Moreover, a number of the accounts here—notably Franklin's—already will be familiar with readers of this volume, as many have been recounted in other publications or venues. The exception is Trench's discussion of the changing role of journalists vis-à-vis the Internet, deftly placed within the currents of contemporary communication scholarship and one of the few times the book breaks out of its print-only constraints. Trench also focuses his attention on the actors and the products rather than the somewhat monocular approach in the other essays toward the process of science journalism.

The complementary PR section, “Practitioner’s Perspectives” from the viewpoint of public relations strategists, similarly is limited in its scope. Most of the essays in this section are atomized accounts of individual PR projects or programs, again interesting reading on their own as case studies but unconnected to larger issues in communication theory and scholarship. The selection of authors and topics in this section emphasizes primarily one aspect of PR, media relations and the intersection of science journalists with one-way institutional advocacy. The principal exception is a well-developed discussion of what constitutes “the public” in public science communication in Gregory et al.’s chapter, although the bulk of the essay is about a yet-to-be evaluated new outreach program on the part of the Royal Society for Art and Industry. Goepfert’s critical analysis of the power dynamics between PR and journalism proper perhaps is the exception to prove the rule; he paints a very detailed picture of how the rapidly changing landscape of communication exposes the weaknesses of journalism, which weaknesses in turn are leveraged by PR activities. These essays on PR practice would have benefited tremendously from analysis of PR trends by PR scholars *not* directly tied to science organizations. The field has developed a very mature literature about symmetric communication models and a body of practice in dealing with stakeholder publics that seems to have bypassed the programs and approaches described here. And last, both the practitioner’s perspectives sections—journalism and PR—would have been well served by an editors’ overview to tie the disparate narratives into some kind of coherent whole.

The final section of *Journalism, Science and Society* consists of a series of commentaries offered to place the issues raised in the first three sections in a more global perspective, with representation from scholars in the United States, Australia, South Africa, South Korea, and Japan. Luckily, these essayists were able to read the preceding sections, and some contributors used that opportunity to provide some of the extra synthesis missing earlier in the book. Unfortunately, each is very brief, and generally sticks to the knitting of considering issues raised in the other sections as they pertain to the essayists’ home countries’ social and cultural journalistic mores and values. Dunwoody’s (U.S. focused) response is the most expansive of the set in this section and provides a valuable overview of the issues in the book through the lens of journalism and PR in remarks that probably ring true for most of the developing world.

“The strength of PR is the weakness of journalism,” Goepfert writes in his chapter, a phrase that could accurately describe the underlying philosophy of the book. More than its narrow focus on print journalism under

ordinary reporting conditions, it is the way this philosophy informed both the choice of content and the orientation of the other authors that limits the value of *Journalism, Science and Society* as a comprehensive survey of the critical issues facing science communication. The complex ecology and interdependence of the science news-marketing-advocacy enterprise defies such simple reduction to a win-loss equation. Nevertheless, in bringing together a collection of essays designed to document a decline in traditional journalistic standards for science print reportage, and the evolution and increasingly widespread use of advocacy models of science communication, Bauer and Bucchi provide invaluable insight into dynamic tensions at the heart of science journalism today.

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Future Bioethics: Overcoming Taboos, Myths, and Dogma, by Ronald A. Lindsay. New York: Prometheus Books, 2008. 313 pp.

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I have noticed an interesting trend in the bioethics community. No one wants to admit he or she belongs to it. Walk into a bioethics conference and pick an academic at random. In a friendly and hopeful tone ask this person if he or she is a bioethicist. Nine times out of 10 he or she would say something like, “Well, I am an anthropologist (or sociologist, philosopher, etc.) who works on bioethics issues.” Often, the look on his or her face will project an “I’m-not-one-of-those” sentiment. I know this response well. It is my default (“NO, I am a law professor!”).

Why this reaction? I think that many scholars want to distance themselves from a field that seems to be permeated with unsupported assertions and hollow clichés, such as “the sanctity of life,” “playing God,” and the all purpose caution against the “unnatural.”

An intriguing new book by lawyer/philosopher Ronald Lindsay takes aim at this problem. As he notes in the introduction, bioethics policies all too often “reflect myths, taboos and dogmas rather than reasoned analysis and an appropriate understanding of the implications of . . . new technologies” (p. 20). Bioethics policy should, in his view, be informed by rational arguments, solid evidence, and, whenever possible, a clear understanding of the true risks and benefits.