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Opinion Leader: Peter Calamai

Tragedy of the Media Commons

By Peter Calamai

The lights are going out all over North America. The lights in this case are journalists who specialize in covering science for the commercial mass media. A science, technology and environment news team at CNN with six producers and respected reporter Miles O'Brien is merely the latest in a long list of science specialists to be thrown overboard by media managers desperate to cut costs.

The CNN axing at least evoked an outcry, including a formal protest from the World Federation of Science Journalists. Too many of the other departures have passed with little notice by journalists or the wider public. How many Canadians, for example, realize that CBC-TV no longer has a staff reporter assigned to cover science full-time, nor does the Toronto Star or La Presse. Until last year these organizations had made prominent use of such staff reporters for decades.

The paradox is striking. On one hand the federal S&T strategy is proclaiming that Canada's future rests with a knowledge economy and that Canadians need to be excited about scientific research. As well, more and more posts for "research communicators" are being created at universities, research hospitals, corporations and science-based institutions. Yet the best knowledge translators between such communicators and the general public – full-time staff science journalists – are shrinking to the vanishing point.

NUMBER OF SCIENCE JOURNALISTS DECIMATED

When the Canadian Science Writers' Association was founded in 1971, there were at least 30 staff newspaper reporters in Canada whose beat was science, sometimes combined with medicine. That number included full-time science reporters with all three news services – Canadian Press (CP), FP publications and Southam News – and with the news divisions of both CBC radio and TV. Today there are about six such reporters, with neither CP nor CBC news having one.

The award-winning "Quirks and Quarks" show still airs every week on

CBC radio (for which many thanks) but in the numbers ledger that's just level-pegging. Nor do websites such as Discovery.ca come anywhere near taking up the slack, with no more than a half-dozen people doing first-hand science reporting.

Such specialist science websites and radio shows are niche outlets which mostly attract what surveys for the US National Science Foundation call the "science-attentive" portion of the general public, generously estimated to be one in five. This dedicated science audience can increasingly seek out science straight from the horse's mouth, since the Internet now provides unprecedented access to research journals once sequestered in university libraries.

The other four-fifths of the public in North America doesn't go seeking science news on the World Wide Web or elsewhere. But they will listen, watch or read if competently reported news about science appears in the mass media they are already consuming.

(An aside: despite all the gloom in the newspaper industry, the major dailies in North America have more readers today than at any time in the last few decades. But online readership generates no circulation revenue and, as yet, insufficient advertising revenue.)

The paradox escalates. Just as more people turn to newspapers for knowledgeable reporting and rigorous editing, newspapers are falling victim to what's called "churnalism." Reporters who might once have spent the better part of a day chasing down tips and following up leads to produce an original news article are now increasingly expected to churn out three or more "stories" a shift. This means no prowling the corridors of city hall or attending a research conference.

Instead churnalism translates into newsroom-bound reporters increasingly writing stories based on press releases or wire copy. The most thorough investigation of this phenomenon was carried out by the journalism department of Cardiff University at the request of a British newspaper reporter Nick Davies, who used the findings in *Flat Earth News* (Chatto & Windus), a disturbing book published this year. The Cardiff researchers traced the origins of the 2,207 domestic news stories that appeared over a two-week period in the five leading British daily newspapers. Sixty per cent of those stories consisted wholly or mainly of PR material or wire copy, with that source mostly not credited. Another 20 per cent contained clear elements of PR or wire material, augmented by other material. The source of information for eight per cent of the stories was unclear.

For only 12 per cent of the stories could the researchers say all the material was generated by the reporters themselves.

While no one had made a similar study in North America, a recent online article by Christine Russell for "The Observatory" of The Columbia Journalism Review makes clear that much the same is happening here with science reporting. Not only are PR releases written by "research communicators" frequently appearing more or less verbatim in daily newspapers but some reporters are even lifting direct quotations from the releases (http://www.cjr.org/the_observatory/science_reporting_by_press_rel.php).

This practice is indicative of a major shift in the balance of power in the arena of science communications. Back in the halcyon days of the 1970s, staff reporters covering science in Canada far outnumbered "research communicators." Given adequate time and resources these reporters developed a passing familiarity with at least some fields of science. Some even became knowledgeable. Many were at least discerning.

This is not the case today in Canada. In most cases science news in newspapers or on air is going to be handled not by a knowledgeable or discerning science journalist staffer but by a general assignment reporter, probably expected to churn out several stories that day.

Being appalled is a natural reaction to this state of affairs. A more useful response, however, is to offer help to the beleaguered generalist reporter. That's the concept behind the Science Media Centre of Canada, which a small group is striving to launch by the end of next year. Anyone who wants to know more, or to help with expertise or money, should check out www.sciencemediacentre.ca.

Peter Calamai is a founding member of the Canadian Science Writers' Association and writes Telescope, the weekly science column in the Toronto Star on Sundays.