

An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at caveman@biologists.com. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

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Why are astronomy and Frankenstein the faces of science?

Try as hard as you like to impress your colleagues with the complexity of your work and brilliance of your thinking, your scintillating PowerPoint presentations, your clever writing in papers in the best journals, and fawning attendance at as many meetings as possible, it is of absolutely no consequence to the average Joe or Jane in the street.

For a profession that has been heralded through the ages as the clique of intellectuals and the thought-leaders of society, and which pushed the boundaries of accepted dogma and societal values (sufficiently so for scientists to be tortured and killed), we research biologists, and especially those in academia, are now in the category of 'other' professions.

We are in the category of accountants,

bankers, distributors, middle management, groundskeepers, etc. A category that is usually part of the background, lost in the distant haze of 'other stuff' going on in the world, and that only comes to the forefront when there is a problem, a need to identify a culprit, someone to assign blame. Some large corporation goes bankrupt and now the accountants and management are blamed; dogs are pooping in your favorite park and now the groundskeeper is to blame; there is an outbreak of some nasty viral epidemic or a famous star of stage and screen comes down with a debilitating genetic disorder and it is time to wheel out the little scientist to explain why and what they are (not) doing.

Biology does not rank highly for presentation on television or radio. It is judged that it is, as befitting a part of the 'background' of life, not sufficiently interesting or newsworthy for Joe and Jane in the street. It will not hold their attention (for the coming advertisements). But, not all branches of

science are treated this way. On the contrary, take astronomy. Here is a topic that seems to be everywhere. Descriptions of solar flares on the news (they could, apparently, disrupt satellite communications). Updates on the latest space shuttle and space station programs (do you remember how it was going to revolutionize the sciences until they found it was overspent by several gazillion Euro and the always vague expectations had to be cut back!). Photographs of distant planets, galaxies at the edge of the universe, exploding stars and reports of where Pioneer or Voyager are located in relation to Uranus.

Astronomy is populated by several media 'personalities': Patrick Moore whom I will write about in another Sticky Wicket, the late Carl Sagan, and of course Steve Hawkins, to name but a few of the field's celebrities. I have to agree that they all have charisma, and the topic is mind-bogglingly complex. And, who wouldn't want to hear one of them discourse on the Big-Bang theory, or how an asteroid might plow into the Earth, the origin of comets and how they

were a portend of disasters, or the statistical certainty that we are not alone in the universe. But, shouldn't Joe and Jane be interested in the cell cycle, or what we know about muscle development and function, or how gene expression is controlled?

Anthropology or, to Joe and Jane in the street, digging up fossils, is another branch of science that has been popularized in the media. The earliest record of our humanoid ancestors or a bird capable of flight, a burial site for voyeurs of a person's life and death, and always one more dinosaur that is bigger, fiercer and faster than before. But what about microtubule dynamics, or the role of oncogenes in normal and disease processes, or conversion-extension in early development? Why aren't Joe and Jane interested in these topics?

I think those differences are a reflection of how 'biology' is portrayed to Joe and Jane from an early age. Recall the number of television series and movies on 'space travel' and the fascination propagated in the media about who we

are (our ancestry) and who else is out there (alien encounters). And, all of us grew up on a steady diet of dinosaurs at school, long before Jurassic Park brought them back to life! Generally, all of these are positive influences, topics that were suitable for children. But what about biology in the media? Here there is nothing very positive: mutants formed from experiments gone awry, special chemical concoctions and rays that transformed ants or plants into monsters (after seeing 'Attack of the killer tomatoes' who wouldn't be afraid of GM foods?) 'Mad' scientists creating humanoid monsters (is this a reason for popular concern about cloning?); the use of scientists by megalomaniacs bent on world domination (is this why conspiracies swirl around outbreaks of viral and bacterial infections). No wonder that Joe and Jane, or at least the media that is feeding them 'science', have a jaundiced view of biology.

Caveman

PS. I will have a solution to this problem in the next Sticky Wicket.

Letters

JCS welcomes correspondence provoked by articles in all sections of the journal. Responses to articles in the Sticky Wicket section should be sent directly to Caveman (email: caveman@biologists.com). Correspondence relating to Research Articles, Commentaries and Cell Science at a Glance should be addressed to the Executive Editor and sent to

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