Stop Shooting the Messenger
Are researcher misdeeds an important subject for journalists?

Should science journalists spend much more time exposing wrongdoing in science? And if they do, will they just feed mistrust of science?

Those questions sparked thoughtful and provocative discussions at two recent science journalism conferences, “Science Writing in the Age of Denial” at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and the UK Conference of Science Journalists in London. They’re obviously of particular interest to us, running a blog that focuses on retractions.

The argument goes something like this: Science is self-correcting, so it takes care of its own mistakes. And scientific fraud is rare, so focusing on misconduct gives a distorted picture of research that will only give ammunition to critics, who want to cast doubt on subjects such as climate change and vaccine safety.

But if science is so eager to correct itself, why do many journals and scientists find every excuse not to run retractions, or provide no information in their notices? Why do institutions refuse to discuss the results of their investigations?

We see the “why aren’t you focusing on the wonders of science?” approach in reactions to some of our Retraction Watch posts that follow up on scientists who’ve been investigated for misconduct. We think it’s important to see whether investigations and retractions have any effect on careers. Do those found guilty of fraud find new work? Are retractions a death knell for tenure?

But a few anonymous scientists told a publishing executive that it was “vile” and “disgraceful” when one of us pointed out on Twitter that a researcher at a top institution had received tenure after retracting two high-profile papers, one of them in Nature.

Sorry, folks, but that’s shooting the messenger. When scientists say journalists shouldn’t report facts that they apparently find inconvenient, they’re asking for special treatment. Would they have suggested not mentioning Watergate in Richard Nixon’s obituaries — or even not covering Watergate at all?

Fortunately, lots of scientists seem to want us to report on retractions and misconduct, at least based on the huge support we’ve had in traffic, engagement and tips. They realise that it’s in the best interest of honest scientists to keep the fraudsters’ data — and perhaps even the fraudsters — out of science. That’s even truer when it comes to clinical research, where misconduct can threaten the safety of people in clinical trials.

The Nixon analogy — while not completely apt, as we’ll freely acknowledge — demonstrates another relevant truism: It’s not the crime, it’s the cover-up. People stop trusting institutions when they continue to insist “Move along, nothing to see here”, despite the stubborn persistence of misconduct.

Sociopaths in science

The problem, however, is that it’s not clear there are any fewer sociopaths in science than in other fields of human endeavor, as Ivan recently told The Sunday Times of London. And it doesn’t require a sociopath to cut corners enough to slip into misconduct — a phenomenon some scientists worry is becoming more common thanks to increasing funding pressures in the U.S.

In one of the rare surveys of scientific misconduct, published in PLoS ONE in 2009 by Daniele Fanelli, found that about one in 50 scientists “admitted to have fabricated, falsified or modified data or results at least once” . That number went up to 72% when researchers were asked about questionable research practices by colleagues.

We’re reminded of the outcry when the public editor of the New York Times asked earlier this year whether reporters should be “truth vigilantes” about statements by politicians and Supreme Court judges. Of course they should, said many of those who responded. What else would journalists be doing?

We imagine that scientists were among those who would agree that public figures should be kept honest. We hope they think science should be subject to the same scrutiny. People won’t lose trust in research if scientists admit they’re as human as everyone else. But they will lose trust if scientists insist they’re less prone to human foibles.

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