

Daring to be Dumb—and Hoping Others Will Join Us

Mark Tucker
JAC Executive Editor

Writing in one of last summer's issues of *Columbia Journalism Review*, K.C. Cole discusses one of the major challenges facing science writers today: getting editors to approve stories they don't understand. She argues that many a great story idea is rejected by editors who are uncomfortable pursuing topics they don't readily understand. The irony, as she describes it, is that some of the most compelling science topics of the day *don't* make sense, even to the researchers who study them. From Cole's perspective, readers would be much better served by science writers and gatekeepers who "dare to be dumb" (p. 10).

I think Cole's point is worth further consideration by agricultural and applied communicators. Our work with technical and controversial topics routinely plunges us into unfamiliar territory. To serve our audiences, we must be willing to venture outside our comfort zones—beyond what we know.

Uncertainty Loves Company

Applied communicators can take solace in the fact that every discipline, from the humanities to the hard sciences, must grapple with unknowns that threaten the established order. It's up to professionals in those fields to either embrace the unknowns and bring them into the conversation or push them further out so as to avoid conflict or controversy.

Such a struggle is currently taking place in physics, where the discipline is struggling to find a unifying theory to guide its work. This is not simply an academic issue buried in narrow, esoteric journals, but a crisis in science that has been publicized in such mainstream media as *The New Yorker* (Holt, 2006). At the center of the controversy are the relative merits of "string theory," a conceptual framework that has polarized scholars in the field. If the theory is shown to be useful, it could help answer basic questions about the structure of the universe; if it is shown to be seriously flawed, decades of work could be thrown into question. While many scholars are retreating to more comfortable and established traditions of the field, others are "daring to be dumb" by leading the debate, exposing areas of ignorance, and trying to provide answers. Despite the importance of this work to humanity (not to mention to the field of physics), the idea of renowned scientists arguing over

Introduction

the value of a concept known as string theory is just too much for headline writers and cartoonists to resist. The whole affair has some of the most brilliant scholars of our time looking a bit, well . . . dumb. Daring to be dumb takes courage.

Fortunately for us, agricultural and applied communicators need not weigh in on the efficacy of string theory. Indeed, most of us can avoid discussion about the subatomic composition of the universe altogether (except, perhaps, at the occasional late-night ACE hospitality gathering, where no topic is off limits). However, like our colleagues in physics, we cannot, and should not, avoid grappling with difficult theoretical and practical problems that prevent us from doing our jobs and keeping our field relevant. There is so much we still need to accomplish! We need to sustain relationships with current audiences even as we cultivate new audiences; we need to understand more about the human interface with new media, as well as evolving relationships with traditional media; we need to know more about message design and how communication techniques must vary according to channel, content, and audience; and, finally, we need to develop valid and reliable measures of our impacts and communicate these impacts in meaningful ways.

Addressing these challenges will require dedicated professionals who are willing to invest their time and reputations in difficult efforts that have uncertain outcomes. The enterprise I'm describing will require more of us to dare to be dumb.

About This Issue

The *Journal of Applied Communications* is our forum for discussing new communications methods and techniques, sharing the latest research, and simply speaking our minds about important issues. I commend the authors in this issue for doing so.

For starters, Blair Fannin shares information about Texas A&M's experience with podcasting. The Pew Internet and American Life Project reported late last year that 12% of Internet users have accessed a podcast (2006). While this is a modest percentage, it is up from 7% earlier in the year. Next, Emily Rhoades and colleagues update us on a novel pilot exchange program for undergraduate and graduate agricultural communication students. Their paper provides information on the program planning process, student reactions to this experience, and recommendations for those considering similar study-abroad programs. Rounding out the full-length articles in this issue, Marcus Ashlock and his colleagues share results from their work on how several key newspapers framed the 2003 outbreak of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in the United States. Finally,

Virginia Morgan shares a review of Anne Lamott's classic writing reference, *Bird by Bird*.

Do you have an idea for an article or review in a future issue? If so, I hope to hear from you as we plan future issues of **our** *Journal of Applied Communications*.

References

Cole, K. C. (2006, July / August). Weird science: Why editors must dare to be dumb. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 155, 10-11.

Holt, J. (2006, October 2). Unstrung. *The New Yorker*, 82, 86-91.

Pew Internet and American Life Project. (2006, November). *Reports: Online activities and pursuits*. Retrieved December 1, 2006, from http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Podcasting.pdf

