

MISSOURI RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS: ILLUMINATING THE SCIENCE AGENDA

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Across the nation, scientists and scholars are constantly working to expand the boundaries of human knowledge. In fields as varied as astronomy and industrial engineering, molecular microbiology and the fine arts, academic insights and discoveries enrich and improve the lives of millions of Americans.

As public institutions, our research enterprise is dependent upon the continued good will of these Americans—on fellow citizens who understand and appreciate the many benefits university-based research has to offer. Most of us acknowledge that the development of an effective research communication strategy is key to fostering and sustaining this support. Yet, as Marilyn Stokstad aptly noted in these pages last year, few of us have such strategies in place. We should, and here's why.

Even as funding for research in science and technology increases, so does scientific literacy fade. Interestingly enough, public apathy is not to blame. Surveys conducted every two years by the National Science Foundation show, in fact, that learning about science and technology ranks highly on the personal agendas of most citizens. Nevertheless, that desire to learn is often frustrated by a lack of information. "More than two-thirds of the American public believe that science is important; however, of those surveyed, only one in nine believes that he or she is well-informed about science and technology. Even more significant, only one in four can claim to be scientifically literate," wrote former director of the National Science Foundation and current presidential science advisor, Neil Lane after the 1997 survey.

Keeping the public in the dark is clearly not in anyone's best interest. It is, after all, a perilously short journey from ignorance to indifference and, ultimately, to antipathy. For years, for example, the vast majority of the American public neither understood, nor were encouraged to explore, the social and environmental implications of research into

biotechnology and genomics. Today there is an intense public interest in these areas. Sadly much of this interest is negative, driven by fear of the unknown.

In the absence of fair and accurate public information, many cutting edge research areas face a similarly harsh judgement. Over the long term there is even a danger that the current consensus in support of publicly supported scientific research, a consensus that has remained more or less intact since the end of World War II, could crumble.

Thoughtful science reporting is crucial if we are to avoid such pitfalls. But from whom? We believe most of us agree on the importance of urging both print and broadcast reporters to tell our stories—professional media organizations have the reach and credibility necessary to deliver huge audiences. Unfortunately, in recent years it has become clear that we should not rely too heavily on traditional media for providing the type of science and technology education deemed crucial by the National Science Foundation and others.

Much of television and press reporting is, in fact, uniquely ill-suited to tackling scientific research topics. Reporters working under deadline pressure seldom have the time or inclination to embark upon in-depth treatment of complicated scientific subjects. Deadline reporting is, moreover, intensely results oriented. Our experience at the University of Missouri—home of one of the world's great schools of journalism—has shown that science and technology reporters seldom attempt to explain that error, as much as discovery, is an integral part of the scientific process. Thus the plethora of apparently contradictory stories that only serve to further alienate already frustrated news consumers.

Public relations departments are the traditional information outlets on university campuses, and many do an excellent job. But their role is circumscribed by their mission; i.e., to ensure that professional media representatives get the story and get it right. Despite the name, today's public relations professional usually deals only with the public by proxy.

Because of the limitations described above, more and more public research universities, the University of Missouri - Columbia among them, have decided to take our message directly to non-academic audiences. At the center of our strategy in Missouri is *Illumination*, a full-color, 32-page research magazine that for the last four years has worked to bridge the information gap between campus researchers and the public. Publishing our own magazine has a number of advantages.

First, we are not dependent upon advertising dollars and circulation numbers. Thus we are free to engage our readers with challenging stories

that might not fit a traditional marketing niche—stories that explain, educate and even entertain a portion of that “two-thirds of the American public” who want to learn more about science.

By publishing our own magazine we can be assured that our stories will get into the hands of people who care about them. From lawmakers, influential donors and business leaders, to sponsoring agencies and prospective students, *Illumination* demands the attention of those with an interest in MU’s community of research. In addition, *Illumination* serves as a powerful vehicle for providing public recognition to individual scientists and scholars. Important contributions made by our faculty often do not become part of the public agenda without a little prodding. The magazine allows us to call attention to the value of work that might otherwise slip under the radar screen of people in the media and public relations.

Finally, along with other publications from the Office of Research—a quarterly newsletter, an annual report on grants and contracts, periodic updates of our Master Plan for Research and Technology Development, and an interactive presence on the World Wide Web (www.research.missouri.edu)—*Illumination* helps to build a sense of community among the hundreds of scientists and scholars working on the MU campus. Scholars and scientists often complained that, despite an interest in the activities of their colleagues, they themselves had little understanding of the work of other MU faculty. Our magazine has changed that.

All of this is not meant to suggest that a magazine alone will create a public fully conversant in the language of science and technology. However curious and sympathetic they may be, non-academic audiences—among them members of the target audiences described above—are a busy, impatient group, seldom willing to tolerate even an overview of complex subjects. Attracting and holding their interest is a huge challenge.

But now is the perfect time to do it. Never before in our nation’s history has science and technology accomplished so much in so little time. The process of scientific discovery has always been a quest to expand the boundaries of human knowledge. Today those boundaries are not so much expanding as exploding. These are exciting times at public research universities. Sharing that excitement with the people who keep us in business should be among our highest priorities.