

Did Einstein wear Brylcream?

Albert Einstein is many people's science stereotype – an old guy with crazy hair, sticking his tongue out in front of an equation-filled blackboard. But, as a practising scientist, Einstein was much younger. He even combed his hair.

The perceptions we have of scientists, and science, are largely formed through the media's portrayal of science. The same applies to other stereotypes – your average cheeky cockney lives in Albert Square and drinks down the Queen Vic, doesn't he?

Mirror reflecting the world

News coverage plays a major role in our perceptions. It is, after all, the mirror reflecting what's going on in the world. But the mirror can be rather selective, and its selection of science news is no exception.

A quick example...

Here are two extracts from different papers (the News of the World and The Times) during the War on Terrorism anthrax scares. Can you tell which is which?

'Two of the dead men's colleagues are fighting for their lives after they too are believed to have inhaled the bug. Inhalation of anthrax spores is 80 per cent fatal.'

'Anthony Williams, the Mayor of Washington, disclosed last night that the mail handler had the inhalation, or pulmonary, form of the disease, which is more serious than cutaneous, or skin, anthrax, and can be fatal.'

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What you need to do

- A quick brainstorm: In pairs think of as many scientists as you can in the mass media (The Nutty Professor; Dr Jeckyll and Mr Hyde, for example). Think about any stereotype similarities.
- Search the tabloid newspapers for science news. Do they perpetuate stereotypes? What are the stories about? Do they use diagrams and pictures? Do they sensationalise or exaggerate anything? I found an example in today's (26 October 2001) edition of The Sun:

'SUPERCROC BIG AS A BUS

Crocodiles are the descendants of a fearsome reptile that was as big as a bus and weighed 10 tons, say scientists.

The Supercroc was covered in armour plates, had vice-like jaws, lived in rivers and liked to dine on small dinosaurs.

University of Chicago scientists pieced together what Supercroc was like after studying fossils and skull fragments found in the Sahara that are 110 million years old.'

Note how the paper says the Supercroc WAS covered in armour plates – the scientists have spoken, so it must be true. Do you think the scientists actually said it 'liked to dine on small dinosaurs'? Note that the source of the story – where the scientists are from, and how they made the discovery – are left until the last paragraph.

On the same day The Daily Star carried a story claiming: 'Global warming could threaten British traditions like the Sunday roast and moaning about the rain, according to research.' The paper leaves it until later to let us know that the 'research' was merely a PowerGen questionnaire of 1,000 Brits asking whether our cultural habits would survive a climate change. On the previous page the paper used a large picture of the Teletubbies with the headline 'TELETUBBIES GIVE OUR KIDS SWELLY TUMMIES' because 'experts' have accused the BBC of promoting bad eating habits on television. In fact the Food Commission had just said that Teletubbies-branded chocolate could be fattening.

- Try and find the same story in a broadsheet (for example, *The Times*), specialist publication (for example, *The New Scientist*) or the internet (for example, *AnnaNova science news*). Write a brief paragraph about how the coverage of facts and figures differ between the publications.
- Buy any copy of a tabloid, broadsheet and local paper. Skim through and, in pairs, do another brainstorm: where do journalists find their news stories. How do you think journalists decide if something is a valid piece of science news?
- Search the Internet for science related press releases. Using the same news source write two different stories, one for *The Times* and one for *The Sun*. The total number of words should be about 450-500 – you decide which article is longer, or if they're the same length – and should contain language and style appropriate to the

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publication. Approach the story from two different angles. Look at these two extracts about anthrax from *The Times* and *The News of the World* for ideas and differences in style.

THE NEWS OF THE WORLD:

'Two of the dead men's colleagues are fighting for their lives after they too are believed to have inhaled the bug. Inhalation of anthrax spores is 80 per cent fatal.

It is three weeks since the first anthrax victim died. British-born photo editor Bob Stevens was infected by post sent to his Florida office.

Twenty-one people may now have caught the disease which is spreading across America in the postal system.'

THE TIMES:

'Anthony Williams, the Mayor of Washington, disclosed last night that the mail handler had the inhalation, or pulmonary, form of the disease, which is more serious than cutaneous, or skin anthrax, and can be fatal. No contaminated letter was found at the scene, but the facility in Sterling, Virginia, does handle mail that has passed through the Brentwood sorting office where two fatally infected postal workers and their infected colleagues worked.'

Places you might go to find the news...

For archived news stories search the websites of various newspapers. Local libraries also store archives of local papers, and sometimes the nationals - ask your friendly local librarian for assistance!

Many science-based businesses have their own websites that include press releases or latest news briefings. For example:

GlaxoSmithKline - Gateway

<http://www.gsk.com/>

Merck Charp & Dohme - The Neuroscience Research Centre

<http://www.msd-nrc.co.uk/>

Welcome to ICI Site

<http://www.ici.com/iciportal/index.asp>

Journalism sites such as <http://www.journalism.co.uk> or <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk> list a number of recent news press releases.

The major newspapers, and news agencies such as the BBC or *AnnaNova*, also carry numerous press releases, as do specialist magazines such as the New Scientist.

You may also want to search the yellow pages for local science-based companies and ring their press office, asking if they have any breaking news - this can often be the best route as you're hearing it 'straight from the horse's mouth'. However, if you're going to use this approach make sure only one of you rings

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each company. Press officers can be shady if you're not from a newspaper, and too many people telephoning will surely annoy them.