

Embargoes on the web

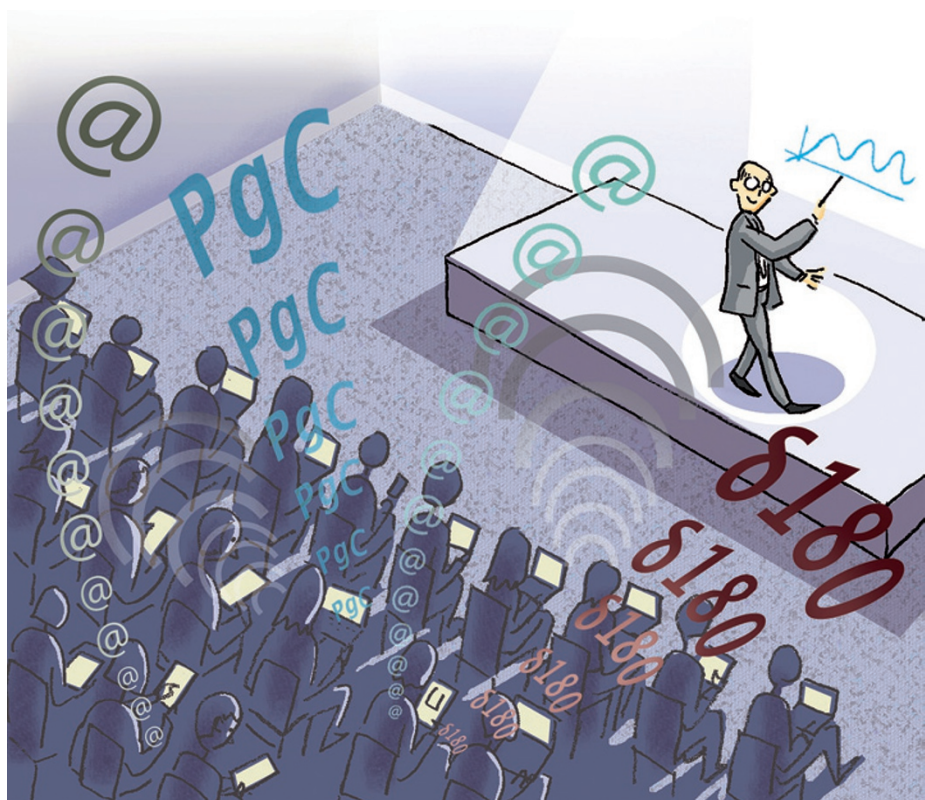
With the advent of Web 2.0, not only journalists report science to the public. Researchers should be aware of the implications for the public dissemination of their findings.

Ten years ago the distinction between scientists and journalists was clear. Equally clear was Nature Publishing Group's request to authors with a paper under consideration in the Nature family of journals: talk to your scientific peers about your results as you wish, but do not discuss them with members of the media before an NPG press release has been issued. Likewise, the press are asked not to broadcast news on press-released papers until the work is published.

In the past ten years, however, a grey area has arisen between scholarly communication among scientists and the public discourse of science. A case in point emerged at the prestigious Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory meetings. These research conferences thrive on the open discussion of unpublished work, and as such permit the participation of professional journalists only under the condition that they agree not to report on talks without the speakers' explicit permission. The idea was to allow free discussion while keeping unpublished results in scholarly circles. Originally, attending scientists were thus under no obligation of confidentiality. However, this policy had to be changed when participating researchers started tweeting and blogging results that the journalists were banned from broadcasting (<http://go.nature.com/OEKVlj>).

Now that researchers, too, are acting as reporters, the guideline for talking freely to scientists but not to journalists may sound contradictory. Who should count as a member of the media for the purpose of the Nature journals' embargo policy? The same basic rule applies: if an author actively seeks media attention before publication, we consider this a breach of our embargo policy.

At the same time, it is important to *Nature Geoscience* and fellow Nature journals that the scientific debate does not stop while a paper is under consideration. This principle also remains: we want our authors to present and discuss their results at conferences and communicate them to their peers. So if someone in the audience — journalist or scientist — tweets or blogs about a talk, we will not consider it to be a



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breach of our pre-publication embargo (see also *Nature* 457, 1058; 2009).

Nevertheless, it may well be in our authors' interest to limit pre-publicity of their results. The original aim of NPG's embargo policy is twofold: to maximize the exposure of papers to the public as well as maximize the quality of reporting (*Nature Chem.* 2, 791; 2010). Both work to the author's advantage as much as to the journal's. Giving the media advance notice of upcoming papers and full access to them several days before publication allows reporters time to research a story, and ask independent experts to comment on the full peer-reviewed paper. It also ensures that release is synchronous everywhere.

Authors need to be conscious of the emerging pathways of scientific communication to the public. More responsibility for managing the public release of results now falls on researchers themselves. Scholarly communication occurs in a wide range of forums, and

the degree of intimacy of the forum may determine how appropriate it is to broadcast a talk. Departmental seminars, given to a small audience of close colleagues, are at one end of the spectrum, and large international meetings with hundreds or thousands of scientists are at the other end. Depending on the setting, it should be perfectly acceptable for a speaker to ask the audience to refrain from tweeting or blogging their unpublished results, if they do not wish them to be publicized prematurely. At the Cold Spring Harbor meetings, presenters are now explicitly given the option to ask the audience not to disseminate preliminary findings to the world at large.

Researchers who are happy for their work to be broadcast ought to feel free to be as open as they like. At the same time, the code of scientific conduct should include a general consensus to respect researchers' requests to keep their work-in-progress within the scholarly sphere. □