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JOE PALCA, PH.D

NEWS AND SCIENCE: A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE

OCTOBER 25, 2012
4:00 P.M.
208 LIGHT HALL

THE
Flexner
DISCOVERY
LECTURE SERIES

Upcoming Discovery Lecture:

PHILIP A. SHARP, PH.D.
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

November 15, 2012
208 Light Hall / 4:00 P.M.

VANDERBILT  UNIVERSITY
MEDICAL CENTER

NEWS AND SCIENCE: A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE

How often is science news? Sure, science stories appear in the newspaper, on radio and TV, and on the web daily, even hourly. But how many truly rise to the definition of news, i.e. something that happened that day and has broad importance? I will argue that science is rarely news in this traditional sense.

How do journalists decide what science is newsworthy? Basically they try to look for the stories that will be the most interesting to the most people. That is why there are lots of stories in the about feathered dinosaurs, and far fewer about membrane ion channels, even though the latter topic may ultimately have a far larger impact on people's lives.

Frequently, journalists (and scientists) try to make a particular discovery more important than it really is. This helps make a story about the discovery appealing, so editors are willing to add it to the day's news rundown. The problem is people get a distorted sense of what science is all about. Science is portrayed in the media as lurching from breakthrough to breakthrough, when in reality the process of science is far more incremental.

I will propose a new model for doing science stories, one that focuses on telling the story about the process of science, rather than just presenting the results.



JOE PALCA, PH.D.

SCIENCE CORRESPONDENT FOR NPR

Joe Palca is a science correspondent for NPR. Since joining NPR in 1992, Palca has covered a range of science topics — everything from biomedical research to astronomy. In addition to his science reporting, Palca occasionally fills in as guest host on *Talk of the Nation Science Friday*.

Palca began his journalism career in television in 1982, working as a health producer for the CBS affiliate in Washington, DC. In 1986, he left television for a seven-year stint as a print journalist, first as the Washington news editor for *Nature*, and then as a senior correspondent for *Science Magazine*.

In October 2009, Palca took a six-month leave from NPR to become science writer in residence at the Huntington Library and The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens.

Palca has won numerous awards, including the National Academies Communications Award, the Science-in-Society Award of the National Association of Science Writers, the American Chemical Society James T. Grady-James H. Stack Award for Interpreting Chemistry for the Public, the American Association for the Advancement of Science Journalism Prize, and the Victor Cohn Prize for Excellence in Medical Writing.

With Flora Lichtman, Palca is the co-author of *Annoying: The Science of What Bugs Us* (Wiley, 2011).

He comes to journalism from a science background, having received a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of California at Santa Cruz where he worked on human sleep physiology.

Palca lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife and two sons.
