

The physics PR minefield

As the Institute's representative in Ireland, I have found that science publicity campaigns have a nasty way of morphing into the unexpected. Usually, my hopes for articles in the media with massive four-inch headlines heralding the latest amazing discovery peter out into nothing, despite multiple press releases, phone calls and sycophantic e-mails. But the real problems come when such campaigns lead to inaccurate, misleading or even suggestive information in cold, hard print.

The first title of IOP Ireland's annual lecture programme for 2009 was a case in point. What was I to do with the title "Can we observe a trapped atom interfering with itself"? Should I mention the possible double entendre to the programme committee? If I drew attention to it, would I be suggesting that I did not appreciate quantum entanglement? The obvious solution was to find an alternative title. Unfortunately, verbs and nouns in physics tend to be very well defined, and despite searching I could not find any suitable synonyms or euphemisms. So, on mature reflection, I decided to let it pass the censor (me). Thankfully, I have not yet found our lectures advertised in undesirable places, but other public-relations professionals have not been so lucky. I shudder whenever I think of the cosmic-physics conference that was billed as a cosmetic-physics conference (fortunately not on my watch), and I am always careful to avoid inadvertently replacing the "n" in "Higgs boson" with an "m" in official literature, lest I gain a reputation for gender confusion.

Another near miss came several years ago when Ireland's Minister for Education and Science was invited to the launch of a book of science demonstrations. The plan was to introduce her to teachers and students performing demonstrations from the book and get some good pictures for the press. Unfortunately, the minister and her Garda security detail arrived half an hour early. I grabbed my jacket and introduced myself, frantically hoping that everyone could see we were kicking off early.

Things were going well until the third demonstration, when I realized that our photographer was late. I caught my colleague's eye and hissed "Quick! Photographer's not here. Get my camera. It's in my bag. Over there." A moment later, she came back, saying "I can't find it – what colour is your bag?" "Brown," I whispered frantically. "It's under the table. Hurry." She found the bag, opened it and began rooting around. You then have to imagine her thoughts. "Where is the camera? I can't find it. I hate looking in someone else's bag. Is this Alison's bag? I'm not sure. Oh, my G...Oh, no! OH, NO! I am rooting around in the handbag of a government minister and that uniformed officer from the Garda is standing just over there." She whipped her hands out of the bag and snapped it shut just as the garda was starting to give her odd looks. Back to me, rather red-faced, she emphatically said "No. Your bag is NOT over there."

On that occasion, the garda kept his suspicions to himself, and we avoided any "Physics staff escorted from book launch in handcuffs" headlines. Lesser disasters are not so easily avoided. Several years ago, I managed to get a spectacular measurement error highlighted in a national newspaper. I had written to the *Irish Times'* regular diarist, Frank McNally, asking him to mention our annual Spring Weekend meeting, which that year would take place in



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his hometown of Carrickmacross. The reason, I outlined in my e-mail, was that this town was "equidistant from Dublin and Belfast – 100 miles from each – and, for that democratic reason, it was where we had held our inaugural meeting back in 1972". McNally responded very positively to the message, writing that he would definitely include it in his column. Shortly before the article went to press, McNally called me to ask if I was happy with all the information about the meeting that I had sent him and whether any details had changed, as it would be printed the following Wednesday. I assured him that yes, everything was fine – no changes.

Delighted, I rushed to buy the paper on the day of publication. And, true to his word, he *had* written about the meeting, in an article liberally sprinkled with my name as the source of the information. Unfortunately, the column concluded "I am very reluctant to correct the Institute of Physics, which will no doubt say that space is curved and the shortest distance between two objects is not a straight line... Even so, I must point out that Carrickmacross was never 100 miles from Dublin or Belfast. Yes, it probably seemed it in 1972, but the roads have improved a lot since. Physicists travelling there this weekend will find it 70 miles from Dublin and 57 from Belfast."

I had not only made a gigantic measurement error, I had also managed to get it lampooned in the national media. Such was my consternation and shock that I actually considered going back to the shop and buying every single copy of the paper to try to get it out of circulation, at least within University College Dublin. I was gripped by further panic when, following my "*mea culpa*" to our committee about the error, an e-mail copied to all was returned to me noting that "...as measurement is my life we have no option but to ask Alison to resign". Fortunately, on closer inspection, the sentence concluded with a smiley symbol. In the aftermath I consoled myself with that all-important "Oscar Wilde" clause of public relations: "The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about."



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