



MEDIA

'Media' is the page of the Society's Press Committee. This section of *The Psychologist* aims to promote and discuss psychology in the media. If you would like to comment on a recent newspaper article, TV programme or radio broadcast involving psychology, if you have tips for others based on recent experiences, or if you know of a forthcoming programme or broadcast, please contact the 'Media' page coordinating editor, Fiona Jones (Chair, Press Committee), on fionaj@psychology.leeds.ac.uk.

Still the jewel in the crown?

THE Society's Annual Conference always provides a great opportunity to showcase the state of the science. The Public Relations Unit press-released 23 of the talks/posters from this year's conference in York, but journalists focused on a more limited range of releases than in previous years.

Research papers receiving the most immediate press attention were Nathalie Noret's (York St John's University) research on how cyber-bullying experienced by young girls has increased over the last few years. Stuart Cadwallader's (University of Warwick) finding that some of the country's most gifted young people use heavy metal music to cope with negative emotions was also a popular focus of interest. There was also attention for Sandie Taylor's (Bath Spa University) finding suggesting that jurors may be more likely to convict defendants they consider unattractive. Charles Spence (Oxford University) also caught the imagination with his research into the use of multisensory driver warning signals to promote safer braking that could save lives. A few other studies attracted notable media attention, but the press clippings board was visually dominated by photo-montages of frightened girls staring at mobile phones, unlikely heavy-metal heroes (Brian May from Queen and Eurovision winners Lordi), ugly and unfairly convicted defendants, and fast cars.

The change to the conference structure meant that, apart from six keynote talks, the majority of the research was presented in poster format. Owing to the budgetary constraints faced by many universities, psychology departments will be less likely to pay for their academic staff to attend the



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annual conference if they are presenting a poster than if they are giving an oral presentation. This resulted in a high proportion of the posters being submitted by undergraduate and postgraduate students. Many of these were of excellent quality and some received attention from the media, but others were based on very small sample sizes, which limited their interest to the press.

Those of us working in the press office were surprised at some of the press releases that received little or no attention by journalists. The lack of interest in the paper on the negative impact of training stress on the performance of professional rugby union players was particularly surprising in the light of the imminent Rugby World Cup. Furthermore, research examining perceptions of support from UK agencies in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami was not picked up by the press at all. However, the paper was based on a report published in 2006, which had considerable press interest at the time of publication. Similarly, although there was some press interest in Martin Conway's (Leeds University) keynote presentation on the BBC memory project, coverage may have been limited by the fact that the data presented at the conference had been previously reported in some detail on Radio 4.

Should this change in the media reaction to the annual conference be a cause of concern to the Society? After all, some bodies such as the Experimental Psychology Society (EPS) don't even allow journalists to report on their conference, believing that they can attract higher

calibre speakers if such researchers do not have the 'fear' that their findings will be splashed in the media before they are properly ready.

We put this to the Society's Public Relations Unit manager Douglas Brown. He said: 'The EPS don't have the same Royal Charter responsibility to disseminate a knowledge of psychology. In terms of informing lay people that psychology is a scientifically based discipline with practice based on evidence, the Annual Conference is one of the jewels in the crown of our work. Other large subsystem conferences come close, but for national news media coverage the annual has traditionally been the focus for our biggest crop of cuttings.'

'There was a slight drop off this year – 160 cuttings generated, compared with 199 last year and 249 the year before. Most noticeable was the big drop off in broadcast this year.'

But it's still not all about print: new media forums impact on how psychology is disseminated and debated in the community. One example of this from the Annual Conference was Tone-Lise Puckey's paper on identity and well-being in military wives which was reported in the researcher's local catchment (*Luton on Sunday*), the national press and their websites (*The Independent*) and debated at length on an army community website. The study's findings that military wives were frequently seen as 'appendages' to their husbands without an identity in their own right was well illustrated by some newspaper articles referring to Puckey as 'the wife of an army sergeant'!

Gail Kinman and Kate Cavanagh

THE MEDIA PAGE

As part of the planned redesign of *The Psychologist*, due for next January, this page is due to change. It is to move to the end of news, with more of a general 'views from the outside' take on recent events.

If there is anything you would particularly like to see or not see in the new approach, e-mail the editor on jon.sutton@bps.org.uk.