

Re: Issues

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.bio.evolution/2005-07/msg00277.html>

- *From:* lamoran@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx (Larry Moran)
 - *Date:* Wed, 13 Jul 2005 01:02:26 -0400 (EDT)
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On Tue, 12 Jul 2005 12:55:12 -0400 (EDT),

Joe Felsenstein <joe@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

> In article <dapr3b\$2fmt\$1@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>,

> Larry Moran <lamoran@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

>>On Sat, 9 Jul 2005 09:17:44 -0400 (EDT),

>>> "Larry Moran" <lamoran@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>

>>>> Who asked these questions?

>>>> Kindergarten students?

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>>>> Science journalists. Who have apparently been trained to pretend

>>>> they are talking to kindergarten students, even in a magazine

>>>> read only by serious researchers and AAAS members.

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>>>>This is really sad. Many of the questions are stupid. They reflect

>>>>a profound misunderstanding of the field. It looks like science

>>>>journalists are guilty of believing their own hype.

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>>>>I expected better from Science and from AAAS.

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>>>> Having met some science journalists, I'd go easy on them. They often are

>>>> people who have PhD degrees but decided on journalism rather than active

>>>> science. However they are under a lot of deadline pressure and can't take

>>>> time to really understand areas, and of course most of the areas they

>>>> report on are outside of their original area of competence. They go to

>>>> meetings and sniff for Controversy, but when they find it they mostly

>>>> rely on the folks they talk to. This means they end up dependent on one

>>>> viewpoint in a controversy (I know, I've exploited that at least once).

>>>> Also for newsworthiness reasons they are strongly biased towards questions

>>>> where there are dramatic alternatives rather than areas where there is

>>>> incremental progress.

I know about this and it's a real problem. There are some science writers who call me for a different perspective on a story but that doesn't happen very often.

But that problem doesn't apply to the top 125 questions in Science. Take Elizabeth Pennisi, for example. She's the one who wrote about one of the stupidest question on the top 25 list - "Why Do Humans Have So Few Genes?" She's been writing about this topic for a couple of years. I can understand

Re: Issues

why she might have first been hoodwinked by those who still believe in the EST data. The idea that most of our genes are alternatively spliced sounds so cool and the true believers can be very convincing. However, after she read the letters to Science and (probably) the emails she received after her earlier articles, there's no excuse. How can she not know that this is controversial? How can she not know that many of us weren't the least bit surprised at the number of genes?

The other problem is the way in which Science selected the questions. Why didn't they ask scientists instead of science writers? How many real molecular biologists would have chosen that question as one of the top 25 questions in science?

- > The difficulty is that the public sees science through their filter.
- > This can really distort things. For example, in evolutionary biology
- > many readers are convinced that the old stuffy boring neodarwinian
- > synthesis was long ago thrown out and replaced by some exciting new
- > theory involving Complexity and Punctuation and Cladistics. Only it's
- > not at all clear what this new theory is (for a simple reason, namely that
- > there isn't a coherent new theory that connects these buzzwords at all).
- > Filling in the details and explaining the context is not a strength of
- > science journalism. They are on to the next area and the next deadline
- > instead.

Agreed. It would take a very good science writer to understand hierarchy theory and explain it to the public. There aren't many writers who are capable of this. In fact, there aren't all that many *scientists* who understand what's so important about punctuated equilibria. When's the last time you saw a good popular science article that explains the differences between Richard Dawkins and Stephen J. Gould? For that matter, when's the last time you read a good article about the evolution of sex or the reason why we have junk DNA? (Did the origin of sex make the list?)

Larry Moran

- *Follow-Ups:*
 - ◆ *Re: Issues*
 - ◇ *From:* Perplexed in Peoria

- *References:*
 - ◆ *Issues*
 - ◇ *From:* g
 - ◆ *Re: Issues*
 - ◇ *From:* Larry Moran
 - ◆ *Re: Issues*
 - ◇ *From:* Perplexed in Peoria
 - ◆ *Re: Issues*
 - ◇ *From:* Larry Moran
 - ◆ *Re: Issues*
 - ◇ *From:* Joe Felsenstein

- Prev by Date: *Re: Lizard engines and rat engines*
- Next by Date: *Re: Lizard engines and rat engines*
- Previous by thread: *Re: Issues*
- Next by thread: *Re: Issues*
- Index(es):
 - ◆ *Date*
 - ◆ *Thread*