

5-1-2010

15 minutes of fame

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Elsevier

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Recommended Citation

Kamalski, Judith (2010) "15 minutes of fame," *Research Trends*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 17 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://www.researchtrends.com/researchtrends/vol1/iss17/6>

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People Focus



15 minutes of fame

JUDITH KAMALSKI

Every scientist believes in the importance of their own research. And, when that long desired breakthrough finally arrives, they believe the whole world will want to hear about it. What happens when the popular media actually agree and feature your research? Do other researchers pick up on it? Does it mean you will get more recognition from your peers for that breakthrough? In other words, can media coverage increase citations to your work?

Researchers certainly do use other sources of information, aside from the traditional scholarly journals. For instance, a 1991 survey found that 57% of Dutch biologists said they use national newspapers as sources of information for their work, and 30% said they relied on Dutch television (1). Therefore, if the media cover your finding, other researchers are likely to pick up on it.

However, does this exposure also lead to more citations? Vincent Kiernan has shown that breaking news coverage by daily newspapers was associated with more frequent citations, but coverage by network television was not (1). One of his possible explanations is that people remember things better when they have seen them in writing. The results of our investigation into the effects of a television appearance on citations appear to confirm Kiernan's finding (see Case Study), but it is of course difficult to tease out the direction of causality – does exposure bring about additional citations as a by-product of increased attention, or are inherently more citable breakthroughs selected for media coverage?

Knowledge should be shared

Citation impact aside, it is very important for scientists to share their findings with a wider audience. The results of academic research are relevant to many more people than those in the same academic subject field, and should be shared with anyone with an interest in the area. At the same time, scientists can do their bit to promote science by speaking with enthusiasm about their results on TV.

There is a risk involved, however. When media report on scientific findings, they can misinterpret or oversimplify. Meaningful results get edited to the point that they fail to communicate the original idea or complex findings are interpreted differently according to the journalist (3). Ben Goldacre, a writer, broadcaster, and medical doctor, gives this example:

“Prostate cancer screening could cut deaths by 20%” said the *Guardian*, and “Prostate cancer screening may not reduce deaths” said the *Washington Post*. About exactly the same study. (3)

So some caution is certainly warranted when interpreting non-scientific popular articles about science.

Ultimately, scientific work that is novel or important deserves to be broadcast to the widest possible scientific and lay audiences. The question of additional citation impact might, perhaps, be seen as an optional bonus for the researchers involved.

Published by Research Trends, 2007

Case Study: Does fame affect citations?

Every month, the President of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences, Robbert Dijkgraaf, appears on a Dutch talk show to introduce up-and-coming scientists. Research Trends looked at the Scopus records for three young scientists who appeared on the show in early 2009. Previous research has shown that the effect of media coverage on citations is strongest in the first year after the media attention, where publicized research received more than 72.8% more citations (3).

In early 2009, Martin Jurna discussed a new microscope, Martine Veldhuizen talked about swearing in the Middle Ages and Appy Sluijs addressed climate changes in history.

A year on, Veldhuizen is not listed in Scopus. Scopus lists eight documents for Jurna, with 10 citations in 2008 (before his TV appearance) and 17 after. For this to be a direct result of his TV appearance, the increase would have to be mainly from Dutch citations, but his only Dutch citations are three self-citations; the rest are international. Sluijs has 25 articles in Scopus, which attracted 222 citations in 2008 but only 220 in 2009 – a slight fall after the show aired.

Useful link:

[‘How science became cool’, *Guardian*](#)

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