

New York University

A private university in the public service

Department of Psychology

6 Washington Place

New York, NY 10003-6634



Beyond journals

A media workshop

Psychology Department, New York University

January 26, 2010, 4-5 PM

Convened and reported by Denis Pelli.

D. G. Pelli (2010) Beyond journals: A media workshop. Psychology Dept., New York University, January 26, 2010.

<http://psych.nyu.edu/pelli/pubs/pelli2010media-workshop.html> is best to read on screen.

<http://psych.nyu.edu/pelli/pubs/pelli2010media-workshop.pdf> is best for printing to read on paper.

You can comment here: <http://denispelli.com/2010/02/16/media-workshop/>

Abstract: Beyond journals, there are books, newspapers, magazines, tv, radio, Facebook, and Twitter. How does one publish in these other media, or get them to cover our work? Publicity is important for the author, the department, and the university, yet is hard and mysterious to most of us. Some of us must seek out our publicity; for others it comes unbidden. In this media workshop at

NYU, six professors (Amodio, Heilman, Jost, Marcus, Pelli, and Phelps) and a savvy publicist (Cerand) express diverse views on old and new media: The media are exploitative, seeking only the sound bite; or it's about establishing a relationship with a good reporter; or it's all one big cultural conversation, to which everyone can contribute.



Speakers: [Denis Pelli](#) (introduction), [Lauren Cerand](#), [David Amodio](#), [Madeline Heilman](#), [John Jost](#), [Gary Marcus](#), [Liz Phelps](#), followed by [discussion](#).



[Denis Pelli](#)
Professor of
Psychology and
Neural Science

Sometimes,
seeking publicity
is condemned as
self centered. I
think this

criticism misses the point. It's good to like one's work, and it's a mistake to suggest that getting publicity is selfish. Today, more and more, we need to convince the public of the merit of our work. For example, if we are to help recruit undergraduates, they and their parents need to hear of us. When we publish in journals, we reach only our professional colleagues. To reach the rest of the public, we must go beyond the journals: either through publicity about our articles or by publishing in other media.

In my own experience, trying to get noticed beyond journals has been scary, frustrating, and hard. Which efforts matter, and which don't? With journals, we're insiders. With other media, we're outsiders knocking at the door. And the rules are very different.

Twitter has many fans and many critics. I wrote an [article](#) in *Seed* about the future of literacy and publishing which was widely tweeted, attracting ten thousand visitors and a thousand Twitter and blog links (including the *New York Times*). That's a lot of people reacting to my work, but, of course, it's mostly the lay public, not university colleagues. So, it was exciting, but I couldn't figure out the equivalent in the *real* currency of journal citations. I finally realized that I was asking the wrong question. We are going through a change, like the change in music in the sixties. The Beatles and rock & roll arrived, and, boy, it was different. Some people really didn't like it, and to them it wasn't music. (For an earlier

generation, the big change was jazz.) Today, the notion that jazz or the Beatles is not part of music seems silly, but it really was different. I think that it's the same with Twitter and the new media. They are an excitingly different way to communicate with others. There is no equivalent in the old currency. It's just different. I think we're going to appreciate it more and more.

I haven't tweeted much, but I listen every day. As background research for my article on the future of publishing, I found experts on this topic, and followed them for months on Twitter. And then, when my piece was coming out, I wrote to several of them—including Lauren Cerand, who is here today—and said, "Hey, I wrote this cool article, don't you want to tell everyone else about it?" And they did.



[Lauren Cerand](#)
Publicist

I'll focus on the value of entering the *cultural conversation*. If we had this workshop two years ago, we might have talked

about MySpace or "Do blogs really matter?". Two years from now, I don't even know whether Facebook and Twitter will be buzzwords. What's important is the evolution, driven by the changing digital landscape, of your interaction with potential readers of your work. There's been a fundamental change in the way we share information.

I did traditional P.R. at first, in the labor movement, trying to insert the experts who I worked with into trend stories that reporters were writing. I tried to get them on radio (especially NPR) or tv, or in the *Times*. When you're on tv, a lot of people see it. When you're in a magazine, a lot of

people read it. But it was frustrating to have only a tiny tiny fraction of the mindshare, although I was very grateful to the platform for making it possible. As I focus less and less on newspapers, magazines, television, and radio, and more and more on social media, like Twitter, the biggest change is the idea is that we're now engaged in a very very big *conversation*. This *cultural conversation* involves people in every part of our society and is shaping culture and what we talk about.

The word that comes up most is no longer *expert*. It's *buzz*. People want buzz.

The social media provide a kind of authenticity: engaging readers with the frank assertion that your agenda is your own, not that of a corporation or media organization. You might not reach as many people as *Time* magazine would reach, but you can tweet exactly what you want to say. This is a great opportunity, if you appreciate it for what it is. People too often make the mistake of saying, "I hate Twitter because Twitter is not the same as the BBC." And I'm like, that's right, because we already have the BBC. The BBC is not Twitter. I think that the value of Twitter is to communicate your passion — "I'm doing something really cool. It's my whole life, and I love it." — to people who are interested in what you do. Those people, I think, are worth reaching and engaging with. There's something interesting and cool that can happen when you do that. Twitter allows you to create a conversation that is as unique as you are.

I've experienced two waves of change. I began with newspapers, magazines, and print, which are gateways. They send information to the consumers, who take it in. Blogs changed this, giving you the means of production. You produce it. You publish it. Some people found large followings. I was engaged in that first

wave of change in art and literary criticism. Lots of people started great blogs. They lived in LA or Berlin and did not write for the *Times*. But now they do. Those people have their audience. They have their platform. And a lot of people in the critical world are doing very well with that.

In the new wave, we demand *instant engagement*. When people talk about social media what they mean is "I want to read this and then express my opinion. I want to comment." That's the engagement we expect now from Facebook and Twitter, which is different from just reading a blog and having the sort of passive engagement that you might have watching television.

I have a personal blog where I write about what I eat for lunch, what I'm wearing, whatever. Someone commented the other day, asking, "Where is the *like* button?" And I thought, "Wow. Facebook has changed us." It's no longer enough to passively admire, or even to comment, telling me that she likes it. She wants *liking* to be the act of clicking the *like* button. Interesting.

I'm on the board of directors of [Girls Write Now](#), which pairs at-risk New York City high school students with professional writers for mentoring. Twitter was a game changer for them, because, all of a sudden, they started to get all of these followers who are moms.

I always tell my clients to try some social medium. Whatever you like. It's free. Go on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#). Read some blogs and comments. If you're visual, try [Tumblr](#). Do it for two weeks. If you don't like it, quit. You don't have to do it again. You can tell everyone you know that it just sucks. But it might not.



[David Amodio](#)
Assistant Professor
of Psychology and
Neural Science

I came into contact with the press reluctantly and inadvertently. Over the past few years,

I've learned that the press is looking for you. It's easy to get press, if you want it. You just have to stick yourself out there and say "Hey, everybody look at me!" We're not in the business to do that, but if you really wanted to, it's not so hard.

Once you find a couple good reporters who care about your work and present it accurately to the public, you'll want to stick with them. They'll want to hear about what you're doing and they might want updates.

It's often a good idea to invite press to your events. I organized a conference on social neuroscience last fall. I wanted to have keynote speakers who would go beyond the field and actually reach the public. David Brooks, an op-ed columnist for the *New York Times*, agreed to speak, and he later wrote a very positive [column](#) about our conference. He did an excellent job of communicating the research in our field and the spirit of the meeting.

Sometimes, depending on your topic, stories about your research may go viral, and reporters will come searching for you. When I did a [study](#) (with John Jost) about political attitudes, I was almost reluctant to submit it because I thought, "It's about liberals and conservatives and the brain," and I could just see the headline: "Political attitudes are in your genes." And, indeed, some reporters wrote that, even though it's not relevant to the study that we published. We got a lot of adversarial press, too, which is different from typical interactions with

the media about one's research. I didn't get any work done for four weeks. I became very frustrated with the press then because I felt that I was being exploited for a controversial story. But I finally realized that it's my chance to promote science and my colleagues, and all of the things that I care about. So I always take the call.



[Madeline Heilman](#)
Professor of
Psychology

I've never sought the press. They've found me. My research is very accessible. It's on

topics of interest to media such as: 'negative reactions to competent women' and 'how being good-looking can be very detrimental to women in certain situations.' Every once in a while, I do a study and it causes a big stir. Radio, newspapers, people calling. How do they get to me? Referrals from colleagues who work in the area. And press releases from articles that are coming out in journals. APA (American Psychological Association) picks out certain articles to highlight, and then, suddenly, there you are. The last 'big splash' for me was a *Washington Post* interview that I did about Hilary Clinton, given several studies that I had done. *Good Morning America* then called me. They wanted to film me running subjects, which I couldn't allow. So they brought in their own subjects to our lab, and ran a simulation of the study. Things worked out: They found what would have been predicted from our research so everyone was happy. Also, a short time after, folks from BBC came to my office for an interview. Because my research is accessible, I haven't had to seek out the media; they have come to me.

Some things to be attentive to: The media can be exploitative. Sometimes, all they want is the sound bite, not the whole story. Be careful about being misquoted, and make sure that your contact checks back as promised.



John Jost

Professor of Psychology

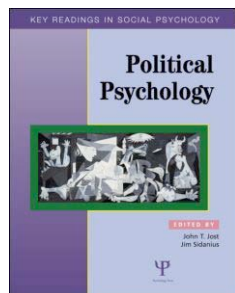
For better or for worse, communicating with broader audiences through the media is becoming part of the job of a scientist in

the 21st century. We all do it, but we rarely talk about it. Not to each other nor to our students.

Journalists work under incredibly tight deadlines. They often need a fast response, within a few hours, or a day at most. So, if I'm going to respond, I respond right away, especially if I know and respect the journalist and her work. It's important to reward the journalists who report scientific work accurately, so I try to get back to them immediately.

Most journalists try get you on the phone, to get a fresh, initial reaction, but my first reaction is often not my best reaction. So I prefer to receive a list of questions by email. This has dramatically reduced the frequency of misquotes and quotes out of context.

I typically email a few relevant articles from our lab to the reporter to serve as background material. It would cost them perhaps \$50 to buy a single article online, so they are usually grateful to receive the material, and I find



that it often improves the quality of questions that they come back with.

In my experience, participating in a significant media event is like dropping a stone in a lake. There's an initial wave of stories, which are more or less identical, and then, after a few days, a new wave, as additional journalists discover the original story. I monitor each wave so that I can help to correct misimpressions when talking to the next wave of journalists. To monitor what is out there, I set [Google Alerts](#) on my name or the topic. So I receive an email every day with links to the latest media mentions. This is not for the faint of heart. People may write terrible things about you and your work in their blogs, even if they haven't actually read anything that you have ever written. But, the truth is, far more people do end up reading about the work than otherwise would have. So, I have come to believe the old saw that, "There's no such thing as bad press."



Gary Marcus

Professor of Psychology

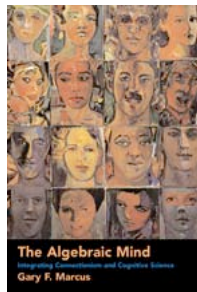
Media is random. You can't predict what will happen. I will relate two recent experiences along those lines.

I was interviewed by the *New York Post* about a class that I was teaching called "Guitar heroes (and heroines): music, video games, and the nature of human cognition." What the reporter really wanted to know, apparently, was whether we would playing video games in class. When I said that we wouldn't (except maybe at a wrap-party at the end of the semester), the reporter moved on to other questions. But then the story ran with the lead: "Students get credit for playing air guitar in class". Occasionally

you run into a reporter who has a particular story in mind and who is not willing to be deterred by the facts.

A few weeks later I did an interview with a reporter I know who writes for *Discover* and the *New York Times*. At the end of the interview, I asked who he was doing it for. “*Playboy*.” I was surprised, but in some ways that was the best coverage I ever got. Meanwhile, I discovered that *Playboy* has something that the *Post* does not: fact-checkers. Who knew?

One thing that makes me different from some of the other speakers today is that I write trade books and magazine articles (e.g. in *Wired* and *Discover*). This extends my teaching to a much broader audience.



More than that, as a scientist interested in theory, and in trying to bridge different disciplines, it gives me a way to develop theoretical ideas that aren't appropriate for a single-field journal. Trade books are a great way to lay out the big picture for a broad audience, and they reach academic peers outside of one's own discipline.

I'm working on a new book about learning to play guitar at the age of 39, and the science of becoming musical, the critical period, and stuff like that. Despite the sorrowful market, I have a whole bunch of publishers I'm meeting next week. [Update Feb. 10, 2010: the book has since sold, to The Penguin Press.]

By the way, emailing answers to reporters is a good way to minimize misquotes.



[Liz Phelps](#)

Professor of Psychology and Neural Science

When your article gets a lot of press, doing media sucks up a couple weeks of your life, and can get very tiring. I don't love doing it. Still, I say yes to most media requests because I think it's part of my social responsibility as a scientist to communicate my science to the public. My research is paid for by tax dollars.

A cautionary note, for students in particular: Don't talk about a journal study before it's published. The journals want articles that are newsworthy. If it's already in the media, it's not as newsworthy. Most journals don't care, but the ones that care are the ones that you care most about, like *Science* and *Nature*. However, if you have a reporter that you trust, you can talk with her about the article before it's published, provided the reporter holds off publishing anything about your story until your journal article is published. This is called “honoring the embargo.” There is an exception to the embargo rules. Journals do allow you to present at conferences in advance of publication of your article, and recognize that sometimes the media will write about the conference presentation.

Generally, the NYU press office will do a press release, as will the journal. The NYU office gives you some control over the press release. The journal does not. The press release is your one opportunity to shape your story as you see fit.

One of the things that I find most annoying about doing media, aside from the time sink that it can be, is the misinformation that gets out there about the work. It's all about control. It's very seductive to talk to the media, but be very

Careful about what you say. If you feel that the reporter is taking the story somewhere that you're not comfortable with, tell the reporter that it's inappropriate. It's important to be clear with the reporter. Listen carefully to the reporter's questions. If the reporter is going down a wrong path, this is an opportunity to correct him.

When we published our [article](#) on the neural basis of race bias, I knew it would get a lot of attention. It was one of the first imaging studies to show a neural basis for something that's so socially sensitive. One reporter wanted to make this a big splash, and started to say things to me about genetics that I was uncomfortable with. I knew that our results did not mean bias was unchangeable; it was just a correlation. Eventually I had to say to him that if he wrote anything along those lines I would call his editor.

Our recent [article](#) on "erasing fear" was written up in the *New York Times*. I told the reporter what we hope for, clinically, but added, up front, that I don't want anybody who is suffering from the disorder to think that we have a cure today.

Discussion



[Denis Pelli](#): I'm getting the impression, from various sources, that press releases are passé, and that no one reads them anymore. [Added Feb. 10, 2010: [Huffington says blogs are more effective than press releases.](#)] That's very different from what Liz was saying, but Liz has much more experience than I do. What about you, Lauren, do you use press releases?

[Lauren Cerand](#): I don't ever write press releases any more, unless I'm doing an event.

[John Jost](#): APS does press releases for selected articles in their journals. A lot of magazine and newspaper articles are written based on those press releases.

[Liz Phelps](#): I think almost every time I've been in the news it was based on press releases. If I know that the journal is doing a press release, I always have NYU do one too.

[Lauren Cerand](#): Definitely take advantage of your NYU press office. That's a great resource.

[Gary Marcus](#): Many web sites directly copy the press release. I think the most important thing is quotes. Blogs often quote the press release as though they interviewed you. That's probably the part that will have the most impact.

[Cecilia Schmidt](#): Do any of you use Twitter regularly?

[Gary Marcus](#): I've done some blogging, but not Twitter.

[Denis Pelli](#): I read Twitter every day, on the future of publishing.

[Gary Marcus](#): Where we, as scientists, can add value to reporting on science, relative to anybody on the street, is in the long form. Writing articles or even blogs, where you have a thousand words, we can go into depth. If you have only 140 characters, it's not clear that we can add anything as scientists.

[John Jost](#): I use Facebook. It's mostly personal and family photos. But I do post links to articles in major newspapers and magazines. Some people 'friend' me just to read that stuff.

[Lauren Cerand](#): I use Twitter to post links to longer articles. That's the main reason I don't write press releases anymore. People like Kurt Andersen and other editors of the *Times* already follow me on Twitter. So you have relationships. Twitter is just a different way of managing them. Twitter is like a network of super users. It's a great way to take a concept that might have popular appeal and make it viral. Or to see what's viral now. I like to 'follow' reporters that I work with and see what's on their minds, what they're thinking about. I ran into a reporter from *Time* this morning because he was in the café where I have breakfast every day because I tweeted it. So I heard about a story that he's writing for next week.

[Madeline Heilman](#): But making connections is a very different purpose than getting publicity for an article.

[Lauren Cerand](#): Yeah. When I work with people, I advise them to think about the arc of their career, and what they want to achieve over the long term. Everyone has mentioned that there are a few good reporters who they really like, who they have relationships with. If people know you on a personal level, and they respect and value your work, they are much more likely to be willing to see your work through the prism that best represents it. Twitter helps make that happen, increasing the value of your contacts.

[Denis Pelli](#): David, can you tell us about your blog?



[David Poeppel](#): I have a blog, [Talking Brains](#), that I've run for

about 3 years. It's not fun, but it does get links from lots of places. We have a lot of daily readers, hundreds a day, surprisingly, given that it's about research. We have nerdy debates about "Did you see that crappy paper in XXX?" They're good discussions, but it's a small community: hundreds of people, not thousands. It is an effective way of having a constituency of readers who are interested in your research.



[Irina Feygina](#): Five years ago, we had Live Journal. Then Facebook arrived. Now we

have Twitter. I think I hit a limit somewhere. 140 characters is too low for me. I'm just wondering, can you accomplish the things that you're talking about using something like Facebook?

[Lauren Cerand](#): Facebook and Twitter are a good way to casually observe the cultural conversation. When you're

participating, you're certainly writing longer-form things. You're getting quoted in major media. You're shaping the way that topics are trending. Facebook and Twitter let you see what people are talking about, what people are interested in.



[Hugh Rabagliati](#): Media exposure is an amazing way to recruit subjects. If you have an internet-based testing site you can recruit thousands and thousands of people.

[Hugh Rabagliati](#): To what extent can we use new media tools to improve science: scientific communication and so forth?

[David Poeppel](#): The NSF has a [grant](#) for that, from their Science of Science and Innovation Policy program (SciSIP). You can get that grant, and then you can twitter about it.



[Gary Marcus](#): I think that we can raise the level of public understanding. One common theme, in things that I write, is, "Here's how to read something carefully."

[Madeline Heilman](#): I agree with Liz. It's a social responsibility for all of us to get science out there, making science part of the public discourse, building appreciation of the research enterprise. This has ripple effects on everything, all the way up to Congress.

[David Carmel](#): In England it's widely considered a bad idea to be in the media too much, not because of the public

perception, but because of the reception you'll get among other scientists, and the unserious image it might create for you. Is this as much of a problem here?

[Liz Phelps](#): It depends on what you say.



[Madeline Heilman](#): Sometimes. If it's frivolous or self-aggrandizing. That's a lousy reason to go out to the press.

[Liz Phelps](#): When you get asked questions that are outside of your area of expertise—like I got asked why Michael Jackson had plastic surgery—then refer to colleagues.

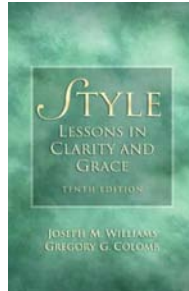
[David Amodio](#): We talk about different media. Sometimes I think that Twitter is best for media people, because it's really hard as a scientist to go down to 140 characters. Having a good web page is really critical. That's your face to the rest of the world. Everyone goes to your web page first.

[Lauren Cerand](#): Yes. Your web page matters. Good media coverage comes from knowing what you're talking about and clearly communicating to the journalist what information you can provide, understanding that they might have a different goal in mind than you do, but there is a happy medium where everyone's sort of satisfied with the outcome. If they have your background to start with, from your web page, you're much more likely to have a productive conversation.



[Tom Tyler](#): We've had a lot of success listing media appearances on the [department web page](#). Many people mention reading it, including students.

[Gary Marcus](#): The best book I've read about writing is *Style*, by Joseph Williams. He takes an understanding of psycholinguistics and how people process information to give concrete advice about how to write. I highly recommend it.



Credits. Photos by [Cecilia Schmidt](#). Text based on notes by [Denis Pelli](#) and [Gabriel Cohen](#).

Acknowledgements. Thanks to Sergej Zoubok and Paulo Campos for help in organizing the event. Thanks to NIH, NSF, and other funding agencies for supporting our research.