haps they have objections to the use of animals in experiments. Perhaps they decide that the fruits of space exploration are not worth the cost. Although public understanding of science may contribute to an appreciation of science, funding levels primarily rest on the values of the public and on a variety of political and budgetary considerations. I would hate to see any justification of science writing based on potential financial benefits to the research community.

Dunwoody: The evidence that science writing influences funding of science is indirect but there nonetheless. That evidence doesn’t illuminate the big picture. That is, I have no idea if science coverage generally makes the public and policy makers more likely to fork over money for science “writ large”. Rather, I’m talking about the likelihood that media coverage of someone’s research makes that research more likely to be supported in the future.

Specifically, I think there is accumulating evidence that visibility in high-status media publications legitimizes the work of scientists in the minds of the public as well as in the minds of other scientists. That legitimacy in turn (and here’s where the data are, at best, anecdotal) probably makes that work more likely to receive support.

Certainly scientists perceive that such a funding link exists. Some years ago, in a survey of scientists at 2 Ohio universities, we found a strong perception that visibility makes you more likely to find research funds. And in countless talks with scientists since then, I hear that presumed linkage articulated time and time again.

An important assumption, of course, is that the coverage is positive, not negative. Indeed, most coverage of science is not critical. I know of no attempts to analyze the funding fate of individuals whose work is trashed in the media. Some years ago, a student of mine tried to look for such a link by analyzing the subsequent funding status of scientists who were given the Golden Fleece Award by then-Wisconsin Senator Bill Proxmire. The data were just too incomplete and murky to make that possible.

Media coverage of a topic, issue, or research project clearly conveys a sense of social legitimacy, and that should translate into perceptions of quality, importance, and funding decisions. To give a quick example, in the 1980s, a group of social scientists found that, all things equal, research that got covered by The New York Times was cited far more often in the peer-reviewed literature by other scientists than was research that did not get covered by The New York Times. The investigators controlled for quality, prestige of scientists and institutions, whether or not the research was peer-reviewed, and where it was published (in this case, the New England Journal of Medicine). Through all those controls, the effect of NYT visibility persisted. Strikingly, the legitimizing effect occurred not among the general public but among scientists whose own research was relevant to the work in question.

Now, if scientists in your own area are judging your work to be more important than the work of others because your work appeared in The New York Times, just imagine the kind of legitimacy this coverage would convey to those with less expertise.

Journalists don’t write stories with funding and the future in mind, but I suspect that such support is one of the byproducts of journalists’ work.

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**THE WORDWATCHER**

**Begging the Question, Begging the Language**

Like an heirloom crystal punchbowl we lift down from its shelf once a year, some words and phrases are prized in proportion to how infrequently we use them. I mean those nice, precise turns of phrase that are indispensable to convey a specific meaning that would otherwise require lengthy explanation.

Such a phrase is “beg the question,” which refers to the logical fallacy of basing a conclusion on an argument requiring proof as much as the conclusion itself does. One form it often takes is arguing in a circle—that is, assuming without evidence the truth of something whose truth is the subject of the argument. In Latin, begging the question is known as petitio principii, or “seeking the start”. The Oxford Companion to the English Language gives this example: “Good English is the English used by well-spoken people; what well-spoken person doesn’t use good English?”

Unless you are a philosopher or just naturally disputatious, you probably don’t have much call to use this expression. Yet, writers who are avid for novelty and unconcerned about questions of meaning increasingly reach for it whenever they feel their prose needs a dash of spice. Some sportswriters apparently don’t consider they’ve earned their day’s pay unless they’ve used the phrase in at least one story.

An example: “If the NBA and NHL players were to begin today, neither the Celtics nor the Bruins would qualify. Which begs th
question: When was the last time both teams failed to make the playoffs?" Headline writers love the expression, too; "Scandals Beg Question: Who Is Minding the Store?" asked (begged?) the Boston Globe over a story about Wall Street finagling. Another story in the same paper began, "The death of Phyllis Hyman, 45, in her Manhattan apartment last weekend begs many questions...." Ms. Hyman's death at an early age was regrettable surely, but she can hardly be accused of having committed a logical fallacy—much less, "many of them."

Medical writers, too—no laggards they—are increasingly pepperin their copy with the trendy phrase. They use it correctly just slightly more often than sportwriters do—about as often as copyeditors receive flowers from grateful authors. One savvy author, criticizing an NIH regulation requiring the consent of fathers to research involving fetuses, used the expression effectively when he wrote that the regulation "begs the question of the status of the fetus by treating the fetus as a child." Another skillful writer, reviewing a book entitled Animal Liberation, referred to "animal issues (as I shall call them, to avoid begging the 'rights' question)."

Far more often, though, we see examples like this: "The practice of anesthetizing patients to unconsciousness so they can die of natural causes begs the question of physician-assisted death." What the author apparently meant here was "evades the issue. This is what most medical writers mean when they use the phrase, although others often mean "raises the question", "asks the question", "answers the question", or "explores the question."

All of which prompts (not begs) the question: If you regularly use your crystal punch-bowl to feed the dog, what are you going to do with the New Year's champagne punch? The English language is a treasure trove of precise linguistic tools. It's a shame to beggar it through carelessness or sloth.

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