How do the media present evolution?

Natural history programmes are a major part of the international media industry – but how do they present evolution? Dr Meryl Aldridge and Professor Robert Dingwall from the University of Nottingham have studied how wildlife documentaries, in the tension between education and entertainment, manage to convey potentially controversial issues related to evolution.

The research focused on two main programme types: The “blue chip” authoritative documentary with high production values, and the lower-cost “presenter-led” documentary with more human/animal interaction and dynamic editing.

High-prestige: low-engagement?

Surprisingly, high-prestige, blue chip programs may actually be less effective than presenter-led models in conveying science practice and outcomes to mass audiences.

The cost of achieving the high production values lead to a way of editing and narrating programmes that maximises their market potential, but lowers the profile of content that may challenge sections of the audience. Typically, the outcome is a text that does not challenge creationist accounts and may even implicitly endorse them.

Bringing the audience in

In presenter-led documentaries the viewer is treated as a ‘co-investigator’ rather than as a spectator to an orderly world. Although the presenter-led format is regarded as lower status by media professionals, the more open narrative form offers greater opportunity for conveying the complexity associated with evolution.

Further reading

- Meryl Aldridge, Robert Dingwall: “Television wildlife programming as a source of popular scientific information: a case study of evolution” (Public understanding of Science Vol. 15 No 2 2006)
- Meryl Aldridge, Robert Dingwall: “Implicit Models of Evolution in Broadcast Wildlife and Nature Programmes”