The media have a central role in telling the story of research in particle physics. We need to put aside our differences and keep our eyes on the big picture if we are to make the most of this vast resource, say members of the InterAction collaboration.

Particle physics and the press

These are exciting times for particle physics, and the world's press are taking notice. As the Large Hadron Collider prepares to begin operations, as the International Linear Collider becomes an ever more clearly defined project, as programs for neutrino physics and astrophysics flourish, and most of all as long-awaited discoveries reveal the secrets of the universe, our friends in the media will share the adventure. Their stories and articles, TV programs, blogs, and podcasts will inform and inspire others with the spirit of excitement that particle physicists are feeling at the start of the 21st century.

The journalists who tell our story will have wildly varying backgrounds, skills, and points of view. Their pieces will cover the spectrum of science journalism. They will define and describe; compare and contrast; make judgments and express opinions; and praise and criticize. Writing in language that is accessible to their readers, they will at times seem wanting in their grasp of scientific subtleties. Sometimes they will appear to lack appreciation for something that we care deeply about; occasionally they may even give more credit than we deserve.

It is accepted wisdom that the press almost always get it wrong. Actually, in our experience, ultimately they get it just about right. In the months and years ahead, the majority of journalists who tell the story of 21st-century particle physics will do an excellent job. From time to time, inevitably, they will get it wrong—at least as we see it. A true test of our character as a field is how we react to this level of media coverage.

At a time of extraordinary scientific opportunity in particle physics, we must keep our eyes on the science and enjoy the privilege of taking part in discovering how the universe works. We should equally enjoy the opportunity afforded by the media's interest.

In the past, there have been occasions when our field has devolved into warring camps, reading each new press article with suspicion, quick to take offense at every real or imagined slight or bias. It's time to change this model. Do we want to be seen as a fractious, contentious community beset by invidiousness, or as a unified community of committed scientists confronting a golden age of discovery? We have the choice. We can set a tone of respect and admiration for all projects and experiments that lead to discovery—or one that begrudges every word of praise for others' work. Without fail, the media will pick up on our tone. So will our colleagues, our students, scientists in other disciplines, and we ourselves. It will be part of what defines the kind of field that we are.

Competition will always exist, and this is a good thing. People care passionately about their work. Of course they want to see it recognized, and defend it if it is unfairly criticized. But we have everything to gain by maintaining perspective. There will be hundreds of stories during the years ahead. Today's lukewarm review will be tomorrow's encomium—and vice versa. We should take them all in our stride, because we are in this together for the long haul. We all want to discover how the universe works. It's a big universe with room, and credit, enough for everyone.

InterAction collaboration members met in Hamburg recently with other particle physics communicators. *Photo courtesy of the InterAction collaboration.*

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