

# The Trouble with Scientists: the pivotal role of the media in public perception of science

Paddy Coulter

Director

Reuters Foundation Programme,  
Green College, Oxford University

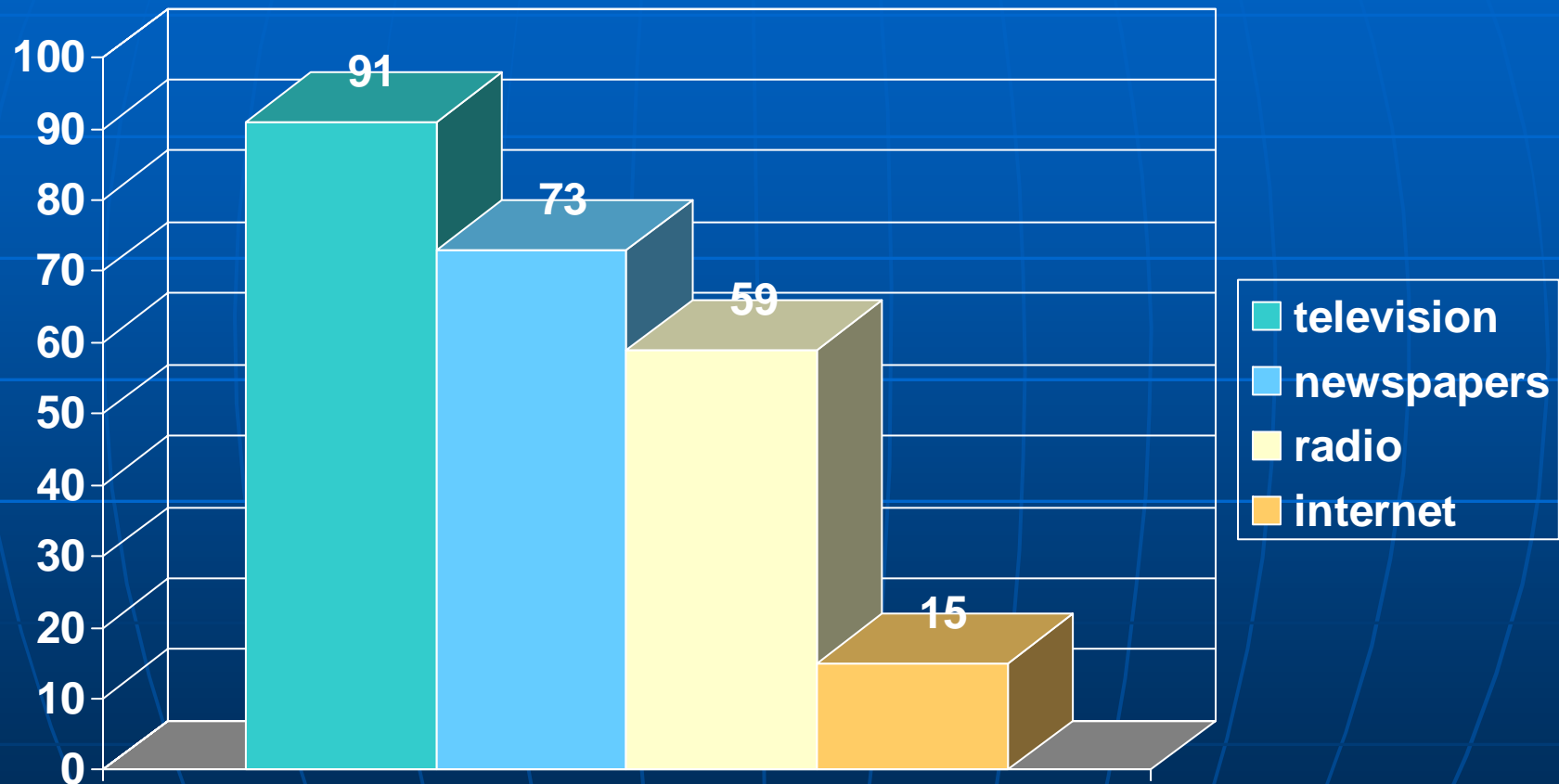
"Society's relationship with science is in a critical phase..... Public unease, mistrust and occasional outright hostility are breeding a climate of deep anxiety among scientists."

House of Lords Select Committee Report  
*Science and Society*, 2000

# Information Sources

% British public finding medium a useful source

Hargreaves and Thomas 2002



# Broadsheet Reporting of Medical Science

Entwistle BMJ 1995

- Reliance on peer reviewed journals
- Full papers used, not just press releases
- News values and political agendas important
- Bias to hospital medicine
- Cautious about "breakthrough" and "danger"

# Impact of Mass Media on Public Understanding of Science

Hargreaves, Lewis and Speers 2003

- Framework to make sense of science
- Greater engagement if story appeals to broader public interest (storytelling)
- Science for science's sake doesn't appeal

# Problems for Journalists

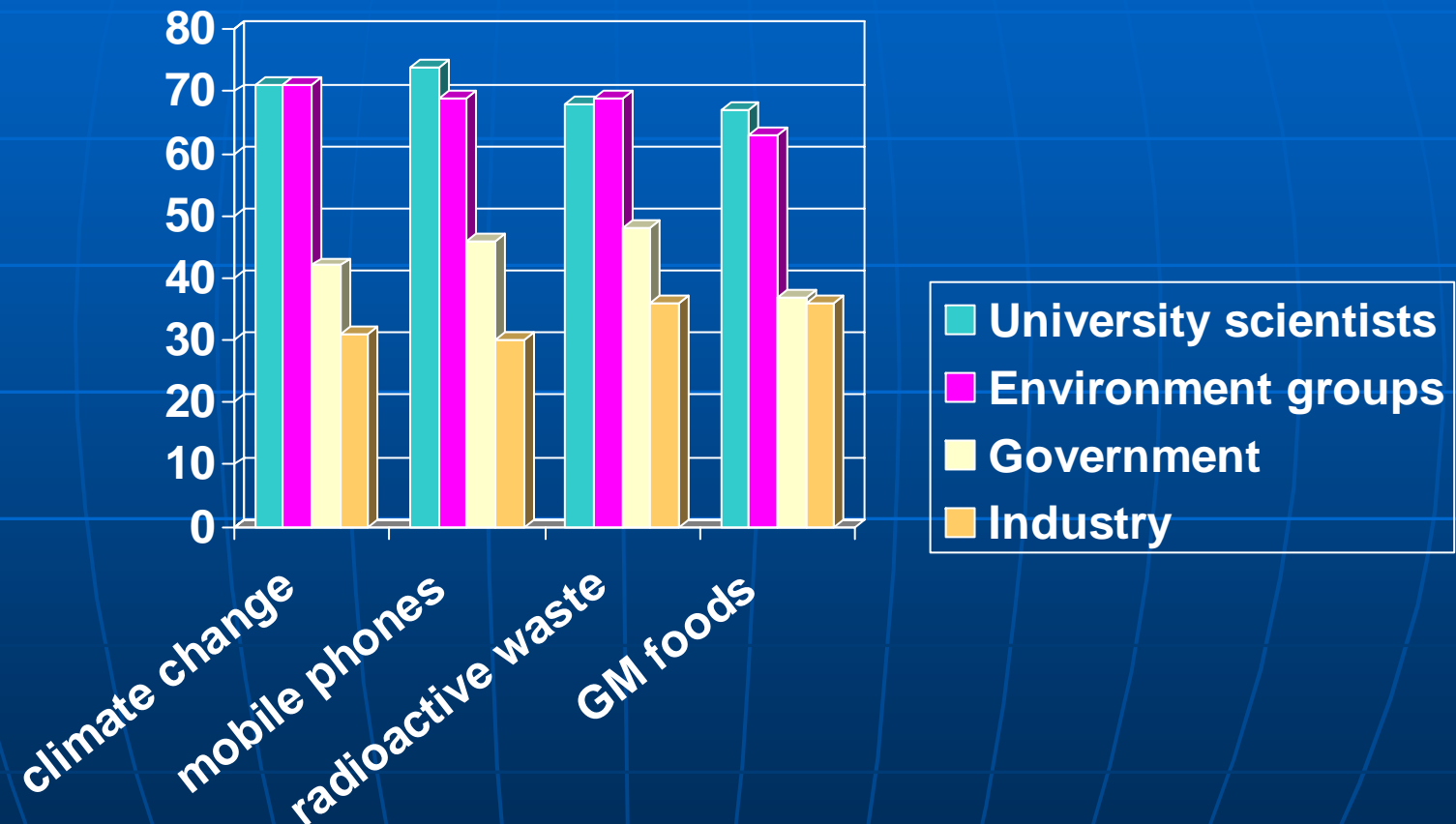
- Adapting science to headline news
- Scientific process vs. news 'event'
- Explaining uncertainties
- Balancing stories

# Journalists' Responsibilities

- Maintain high standards
- Strive for balance
- Apply critical stance

# Scientists' Trustworthiness Rankings

Source UEA/MORI 2003

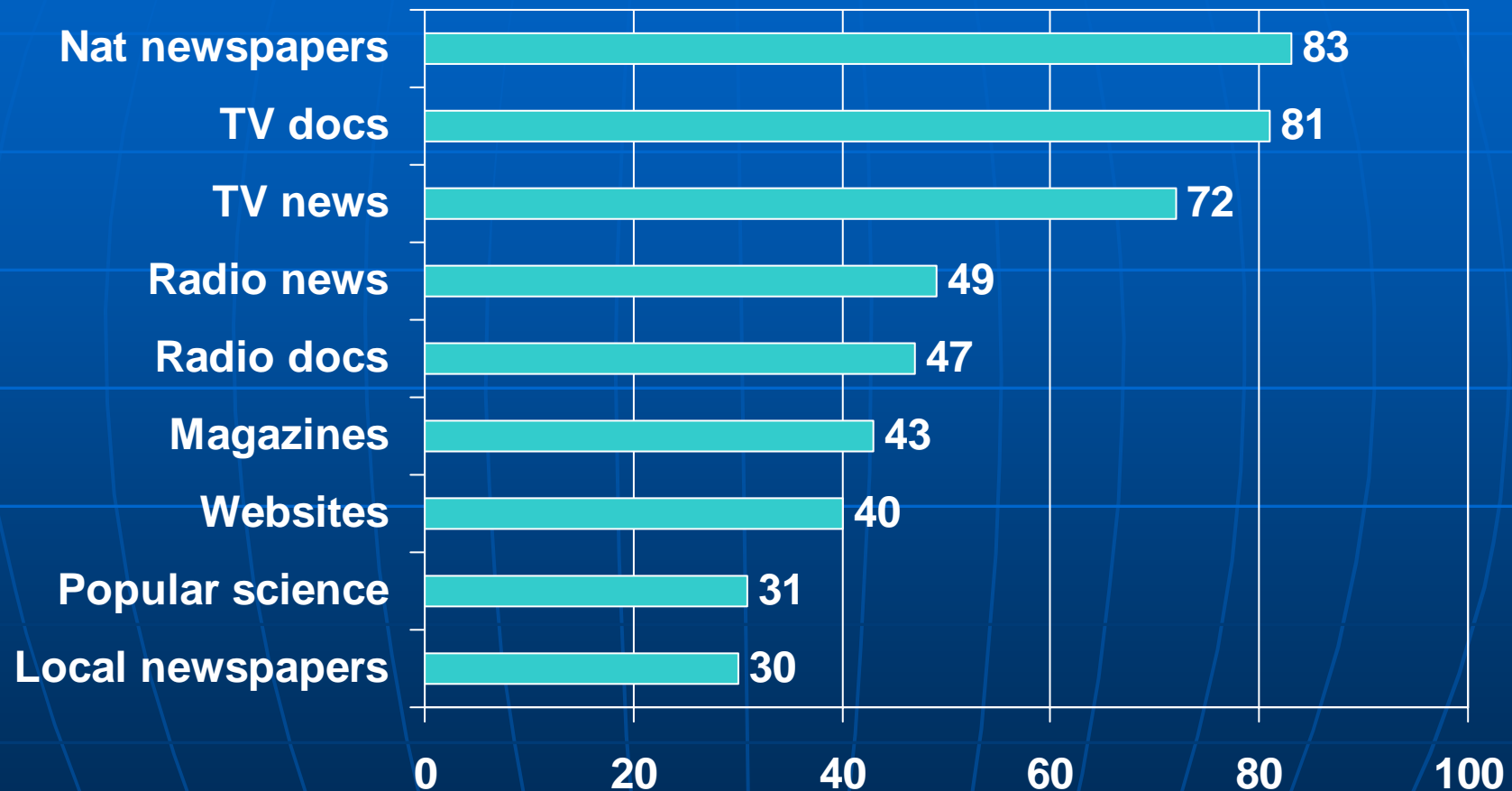


# Scientists' Role

MORI for Wellcome Trust 2000

- Majority (84%) accept duty to communicate research to public
- Only 29% have dealt with media in past year
- Only 10% have undergone media training
- 4 in 10 scientists do not contribute to press releases about their research

# Scientists' Perceptions of Where Public Obtains Science Information



# Scientists' Responsibilities

- Accept openness is only way to win public trust
- Understand the mass media
- Aim for brevity and clarity
- Undergo media training
- Recognise value of PROs (pay more, hire more)
- Be prepared to react rapidly