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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](#)”