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The Hoopla Over the Higgs Boson: A Window into the State of Science Journalism

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On July 4, experimenters at the European particle physics laboratory, CERN, near Geneva, Switzerland, held a special seminar in which they reported that they had at last discovered something resembling the Higgs boson, the last missing piece in particle physicists' standard model. The event drew more than 100 journalists, including myself, and the days leading up to the seminar evolved in almost a caricature of a media circus. Rumors coursed across the internet, bloggers prognosticated about what would be reported, anonymous sources whispered confidence levels to eager reporters, and on the very eve of the seminar CERN's own press office inadvertently leaked a video explaining many of the details. At a post-seminar press conference, dozens of photographers and videographers swarmed Peter Higgs, the eponymous theorist from the University of Edinburgh. Higgs even had his own handler to help him fend off the press onslaught. It was all great fun, but for a traditional journalist the event highlighted the many open questions we journalists now face. In the age of blogs and Twitter, does anybody really care that journalists try to put together fair, balanced, and accessible accounts of events? Or are people just as happy to get their information directly from researchers through their blogs or the lab through its press office? Is being first out with the story the only measure of success these days, or is there still a market for deeper analysis? I'll use the Higgs hoopla as a lens to lay out the questions as I see them. I am hoping to get the answers of the members of the audience in a discussion.