

Description

The challenges we face today, like climate change, a global pandemic, and rapid technological advances are overwhelming in their scale. Many of the issues in our world today have their basis, and solutions, in science. But science reporting still struggles to compete with topics like politics and the economy in mainstream news. With the outbreak of COVID-19, the need for informed scientific journalism has become more urgent than ever. Bad reporting on scientific breakthroughs and reports can leave the average person confused or misinformed.

Accurate, clear science journalism is critical to combat misinformation and promote public trust. Misinformation can lead to tragedies like people consuming fake medicine and becoming hurt or even dying. In the midst of the global crisis caused by COVID-19, the participation of scientists in science journalism is a must to guide the public in the right direction. Can scientists become journalists to bridge this gap?

The Current State of Science Journalism

New scientific breakthroughs are reported in the mainstream news every day. But it is not uncommon for such breakthroughs to be inaccurately reported or overblown. One reason for this is the change that journalism itself has experienced in the last decade. As traditional print media was replaced by online news, media outlets found themselves suffering financially. Many news outlets sacrificed their science departments as a result. As journalism has transformed, many articles simply state article highlights without playing the critical watchdog role of the traditional press. Much like the problems plaguing scientific journals, the news media likes to focus on flashy new discoveries rather than the more boring hard science that is so fundamental to advancing research.

However, some in the scientific community think that this can be changed if scientists themselves become journalists. The argument is that by participating directly in science reporting, scientists can influence the public discourse and policy. Because scientists have the expertise and background to understand the context for new discoveries, they can do the work of highlighting important studies. In other words, more scientists in journalism could have the result of reducing “clickbait” articles and better informing the public.

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What Can Scientists Add to Journalism?

The current COVID-19 crisis has drawn new attention to the importance of accurate science reporting. As new developments occur daily and misinformation spreads rapidly, it is hard to know what news reports are reliable and which are not. But with a pandemic, the consequences of misinformation can be deadly. Already rumors and unscientific reporting have resulted in tragic deaths. Can the participation of scientists in journalism stop this kind of bad information from spreading? Maybe not, but the active participation of knowledgeable scientists in the public discourse can certainly offer people a reliable perspective.

Science journalists can also play the watchdog role that we need from news media. Knowledgeable scientists have an easier time identifying “junk” studies and overblown results than the average journalist. Because of this, they can reveal fraudulent or dishonest reporting on science. They can also connect more easily to other scientists, who are often reluctant to speak with journalists for fear of misrepresentation. And by talking honestly about themselves and how they became scientists, they can increase public trust in science journalism.

The Importance of Scientists in Journalism

The debate over whether or not more scientists should participate in journalism is not complete without examining the role of scientific journals. While the push for open access and open science continues, the reality is many scientific studies are not available to the public. Restrictive paywalls and publishing rules force the average member of the public to rely on science journalism to learn. Without scientists leading the way, science journalism will continue to struggle to inform the public adequately about new advances in science.

The presence of scientists in science journalism is also important in the process of building public trust. The public is, at this point in time, familiar with the “revolutionary” scientific study discussed in the news one day and debunked the next. The increase of clickbait science “news” articles has led to a decrease in public trust in science. This has had harmful consequences beyond the current pandemic. One prominent example is how the rise of anti-vaccination groups has led to a resurgence in measles. By lending their expertise to journalism, scientists can help rebuild some of that trust.

But scientists don’t need to feel like participating in science journalism is a public service. Many find that it can improve their careers as well. One study found that scientists who engage with society improve their own academic performance. Scientists who write for news outlets can have their articles shared with thousands of people and become well-known across different fields. By participating in science journalism, you can share your valuable knowledge outside academia while enjoying a career boost within it.

The Intersection of Journalism and Academia

So far, we have talked about the conflict between academic publishing and science journalism. But there is plenty of potential for science journalism, and the increased participation of scientists, to help academia. If more scientific experts participate in journalism, public trust and interest in science will

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increase. Public opinion is a key factor in public policy decisions. Any country with a well-informed, scientifically literate public will be strongly inclined to invest heavily in academia and scientific research. More scientists and prominent research can often lead to changes in public policy on scientific issues as well. These issues, as we see today, affect all of us. There is an opportunity to create a virtuous circle between science journalism, academia, and scientifically based public policy. The increased participation of scientists in journalism can be the first step.

What do you think of science journalism? Can the increased participation of scientists in journalism help increase the quality of science reporting? Let us know your thoughts in the comments below.

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Date Created
2020/04/10
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