

Parallel Session 10: Science communicator, is it a good profession?

THE SCIENCE COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONAL IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

The Australian Science Communicators (ASC) was formed in February 1994 in response to a demand by professionals working around Australia for an organisation that would help them to network and share ideas. Since this time science communication has become a recognised profession in Australia. This paper reports the results of a survey of science communicators and explores the questions: who are science communicators, what do they do, what influences them, and how do they see their career path.

Key words: science communicator, Australian Science Communicators, science communication

Context

The Australian Science Communicators (ASC) was formed in February 1994 in response to the demand of professionals around Australia for a forum for networking and sharing ideas. At the time it was a revelation. There was so much enthusiasm for the idea that 375 individuals across Australia agreed to become founder members.

At the time, science communication was an isolated profession. Every science organization, every division of CSIRO had one science communicator, but they had no organised way of talking to their colleagues.

There was no opportunity to share experiences or exchange ideas. Tertiary courses in science communication were at an embryonic stage. Publishing articles on science communication was a fanciful idea, and attending international meetings to discuss professional issues was almost unknown.

That was a decade ago. Now there are 465 members in ASC and science communication is a recognised profession in Australia, probably more so than in any other developed country.

Method

During May this year, a web-based survey was promoted to those on the ASC email list, to which both members and non-members can subscribe. The aim of the survey was to get a snapshot of science communication in Australia today.

Results

The web-based survey received 142 responses, with 101 (71%) of these responses being from ASC members. The majority of ASC members (56%) had been members for less than three years. The majority of respondents (77%) called themselves science communicators consistently or sometimes.

Who are science communicators?

The top five professions reported by respondents were:

- Public relations/media officer/communication officer for a science-related organisation (36%)
- Scientist doing science communication (20%)
- Freelance writer or editor (16%)
- Consultant (15%)
- Journalist (13%)

Science communicators tend to be female (61%) and between the ages of 26 and 35 (38%).

While the majority of science communicators (49%) were in full-time employment, a significant number (45%) reported part-time work as a science communicator. These results were reflected in their earnings with the majority (34%) earning between A\$40-60,00 a year, but a significant proportion (27%) earning less than A\$20,000 a year.

The vast majority of respondents (79%) had a science degree of some sort, but a significant proportion (32%) had also had formal training in science communication. The majority (54%) also thought that science communicators should hold a science degree, but a significant proportion also (42%) disagreed with this.

The majority agreed or strongly agreed (57%) that science communication was now a respected profession in Australia. They also agreed (71%) that science communication was a different profession to public relations.

What do science communicators do?

The five most common tasks reported by survey respondents were:

- Writing (94%)
- Editing (80%)
- Web development (70%)
- Partner/client/stakeholder liaison (61%)
- Event management (56%)

The least common tasks reported were:

- Political liaison/lobbying (20%)
- Communication research (23%)
- Audio-visual production (30%)

- Scientific research (30%)
- Exhibition design and management (41%)

Science communicators are most likely to interact with scientists (96%), the general community (88%), research managers (71%) and journalists (70%). They are least likely to interact with politicians (36%).

When asked to define science communication, almost all survey respondents defined it in terms of making science more meaningful to the public, whether this was through translating complex concepts or by creating a dialogue.

What influences science communicators

The biggest influence for getting people involved in science communication is an interest in science (92% said consistently or sometimes) and/or a background in science (83% said consistently or sometimes). However, training in science communication also appears to be important (49% said consistently or sometimes).

The most common occupations prior to becoming a science communicator were students (31%) followed by scientists (23%).

When science communicators were asked about what they enjoyed most about science communication, the most common responses were about:

- Translating science into laymen's language for the general public
- Meeting interesting people, including interacting with researchers
- Finding out about stimulating ideas and new scientific advances
- The varied nature of the job of a science communicator, which often involved a great deal of creativity
- Seeing the general public, including children, gain enjoyment from science

When communicators were asked what they found most frustrating about working as a science communicator, they highlighted the lack:

- of willingness by scientists to communicate
- resources, especially funding
- value put on science communication, especially by organisational managers
- appreciation by media representatives for the needs of science (for accuracy etc)
- recognition for science communication

When respondents working in organisations were asked about their status within that organisation, the majority (56%) rated it as low, while a third (31%) rated it as high.

Most ASC members found value (77% high or medium) from being a member of ASC through branch meetings, the e-list, networking and professional development.

How do science communicators see their careers developing?

The majority of respondents (51%) plan to continue working as a science communicator until retirement.

Respondents were split in their opinions about whether there were many employment opportunities in Australia (54%) or not (42%). However, only a quarter of respondents agreed there was a good career path for communicators in Australia. The majority (49%) disagreed with this statement.

What have been the key changes in the past decade?

When survey respondents were asked about the key changes over the past 10 years to science communication they highlighted the rise in the numbers of science communicators and the increased recognition and respect for the profession. They also mentioned the increase in tertiary science communication courses available and shift in focus towards commercialisation and marketing outcomes. Some cautioned about the influx in 'in-experienced operators' to science communication and the need to ensure quality science communication.

Conclusion

The survey provided a snap shot of science communication in Australia today. It needs further detailed analysis and research to determine some of the implications of for future development of science communication.

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MAXIMISING SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN SCIENCE COMMUNICATION: SOME LESSONS FROM ANTHROPOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

This paper begins with the premise that science communicators – though a diverse breed - are all facilitators of social/public participation in science. Given this, four short examples are presented deriving from the author's prior experience in anthropology and psychology. The examples are summarised as; culture clash, notions of rationality, relativism and culture change. Using these, the importance of social awareness to science communication theory and practice is highlighted. It is argued that science communication without recognition of, and responsiveness to, social context is science evangelism.

Key words: facilitation, context, culture

Text

As a practice and a discipline, science communication is extremely diverse. Underlying this diversity however, is at least one, central theme: our role as facilitators of social/public participation in science. To fulfil this role effectively, we need to be equipped to recognize and respond to the demands that varying social contexts may make upon us. In this paper, I present four examples from anthropology and psychology, each aimed at enhancing the science communicator's awareness of social context, and therefore their capacity to facilitate societal science participation.

Culture clash

A useful way to highlight social context is via cross-cultural comparisons, remembering that "culture" refers to more than just differences in ethnicity. First, an example of a culture clash within one ethnic group from a conference held in Australia, sponsored by the Forum for European-Australian Science and Technology Cooperation (FEAST).

This science/technology research-focussed forum ("Networking for Excellence") featured researchers, bureaucrats and practising scientists, and focussed on economic-related science issues. The 'clash' occurred at the beginning of the plenary session "Science and Social Responsibility". As this session began, over half the attendees left – a dramatic example of cultural difference unrelated to ethnicity. The message to science communicators? Many involved with science have no interest in the social contexts in which science exists.

Notions of Rationality

Taking a traditional view of culture and applying it to science communication is also enlightening when considering awareness of social contexts. James Frazer, author of the classic anthropological work *The Golden Bough*, proffered two laws anthropologists could use when rationalising the logic behind ‘primitive’ magic. These are the laws of similarity, and of contagion¹.

The first law describes how like produces like, as happens with voodoo dolls. A voodoo doll looks like a magic practitioner’s intended victim because they assume that anything inflicted upon this likeness will accordingly happen to their victim.

The second law, ‘contagion’, suggests that objects which have been in contact remain connected after separation. Hence some Australian Aboriginal groups ensuring others cannot find their nail clippings as these could be used to inflict harm ‘remotely’.

Interestingly, similar ‘misperceptions’ - from the vantage of science - occur in science-literate societies, too. Notions of contagion are demonstrated by people who believe that choosing the same lottery numbers each week enhance their chances of winning. Implicitly they believe that the balls drawn from the lottery machine this week affect, or infect, those drawn in subsequent weeks.

The law of similarity can be seen in the still poorly-evidenced belief that watching violent movies ‘makes’ people violent, or that subliminal advertising ‘makes’ people buy things they don’t want. A half-century old anthropological theory is relevant to the work of science communication today.

Relativism

From here, I want to consider cultural relativism: the idea that cultural practise is best understood from within the culture that adheres to it. Adopting this position can be productive, as anthropologists found when interpreting magical beliefs outlined above. So too, the science communicator may appreciate the position of, for example, a community of loggers unsympathetic to views of environmental scientists whose research they communicate. Appreciating the loggers’ “anti-environment” stance relativistically may reveal a “pro-survival” stance when viewed from within the loggers’ culture. But relativism can only go so far.

A clinical psychologist I knew spoke of working in Thailand with villagers who routinely sold their daughters into urban prostitution so their families could survive. For a time, she tried to remain relativistic, understanding this practice in context. In the end though, her moral sensibilities no longer allowed her even tacit complicity in such practices. She broke down from the stress of trying to resolve her personal beliefs with her professional duties. Her message? Recognize and maintain your own moral standards. Without these, we operate without grounding, swinging from belief to belief as the immediate social environment dictates. This is particularly relevant to science

¹ see http://www.sciencedaily.com/encyclopedia/magic__paranormal_ for more background

communicators working in areas involving ethically charged research and practice, such as reproductive technologies, bioprospecting and the environmental science.

Culture change

My last point, using an example combining anthropology and psychology/psychiatry, is this: social contexts, and more broadly cultures, change. They are neither static nor preservable. This example comes from the history of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM), the 'bible' of psychiatric diagnosis. The DSM-I, first published in 1952, has been substantively revised thrice (DSM-II, DSM-III and DSM-IV). To demonstrate how (scientific) culture changes, I will consider DSM-II. Published in 1968, it included homosexuality as a mental illness. In 1973, well before the next formal revision (DSM-III, 1980), the American Psychiatric Association voted to remove homosexuality from the DSM-II. This change, brought about not *by* science, but *in* science, was influenced by contemporary changes in society/culture. Social acceptance of homosexuality had changed, and psychiatry and psychology were moved to change too.

This example highlights that scientific culture changes, and does so in relation to the social context of the society in which it exists. It shows how social context, culture, and the psychiatric sciences are inextricably entwined, suggesting again that awareness of social contexts is a highly desirable trait for a science communicator.

Conclusion

Culture clashes, concepts of rationality, cultural relativism and culture change - all are examples of the diverse interaction of social context and understanding. Considering the science communicator as facilitator of social participation in science, the relevance of these examples is clear: science communication will be enhanced by socially aware practice. Without this, it is little more than science evangelism.

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THE RISE OF SCIENCE JOURNALISM IN DENMARK

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Abstract

In the context of a large-scale national project on the history of Danish science, we conduct a historical investigation into the rise of science journalism in Denmark, 1938-1951. In particular, seeing science journalism as cultural boundary-work (Gieryn 1999), we study the work and lives of the two first professional science journalists in Denmark, Børge Michelsen and Niels Blædel. We situate their work in a context of scientific and public culture and try to take into account their different journalistic experiences.

Key words: Science journalism, history, Denmark

Text

Context

While Danish journalists have been reporting science since the 19th century, the professional science journalist is a recent feature of Danish history. Professional science journalists face a threefold problem of mediation. First of all, they have to know enough about science to gather and translate information about very difficult and intricate fields of expertise; secondly, they have to be very conscious not to take the hierarchical structures of scientific expertise for granted and to relate scientific topics to other fields of human experience; thirdly, they have to draw science into more general discussions of public interest. The first part of the problem is technical for the most part and a cornerstone in science journalism's professional code. The two latter parts of the mediation problem relate to the social and epistemic boundaries between science and society.

Science journalism may be seen as cultural boundary-work described by sociologist of science Thomas F. Gieryn (1999). Science journalists demarcate science as a culturally discrete and identifiable activity. Yet, at the same time, they also break down existing boundaries between science and society by creating a new cultural space for the interpretation and understanding of science, namely science as public news.

Objective

Our objective is to situate the work of the first, professional science journalists in the context of contemporary changes in Danish scientific and public culture. Looking at the ways in which the first “real” science journalists in Denmark responded in different ways to their role as mediator between science and society, we want to demonstrate that science journalism may be seen attempts to create a historically specific and cultural space for science.

Methods

Our study is a qualitative, historical investigation. It is carried out in relation to the on-going, five-year project on the history of Danish science, organized by the History of Science Department, University of Aarhus.¹ We study the articles of the two first science journalists in Denmark and try to situate them in the wider context of the contemporary history of science and social history. Also, we aim to look at the journalistic experiences of the two journalists in mention and to make it significant for their science journalism.

Results

We find that the first two science journalists in Denmark, Børge Michelsen and Niels Blædel, focused their journalistic efforts on: 1) science (and, particularly, science carried out in Denmark) as an exemplary, noteworthy, and valuable activity, and 2) the lack of government support financial and the consequent job-related difficulties of younger scientist (see e.g. the collection of articles in Michelsen 1941, and Blædel 1949). In their science journalism, science was culturally demarcated as being something different from, yet on a par with other culturally and nationally important activities such as literature and the arts. This has to be understood in the context of WWII, which put Danish nationality under pressure, and thus created a need to promote the efforts of Danish citizens, including Danish scientists.

At the same time as aligning science, literature, and the arts, Michelsen and Blædel depicted science as an important part of the political economy of Denmark. Science, in their view, gave rise to technical advances and therefore had to be supported. Their endeavors trying to increase public support for science were in concordance with similar undertakings by several scientists and a few politicians at the time.

What separated the science journalism of Michelsen from that of Blædel was Michelsen’s occupation with the daily work of scientists (Michelsen 1941). Before taking up science as a journalistic specialty, Michelsen wrote about the everyday life of different trades, and, so, seeing science as yet another trade must have seemed naturally to Michelsen. Blædel’s starting-point was different in that he came to science journalism without much journalistic experience. He concentrated his articles about the results of science, and not its daily routines.

Conclusions

From our studies of the rise of science journalism in Denmark, we conclude that it is, indeed, fruitful to see science journalism as cultural boundary-work that

demarcates science from other cultural activities. We conclude that the rise of science journalism in Denmark is contextually situated, i.e., it is in part a reflection of and response to contemporary developments in scientific as well as public life. Finally, we also conclude that science journalism reflect the individual background of the journalist involved.

Notes

1 The principal objective of this project is to write a four-volume work in Danish on science in Denmark from the Middle Ages until recent times situating science in the context of national and international history. The two last volumes include chapters on the popularization of science. We aim to cover the topic broadly by looking at many different kinds of science popularization, including science journalism.

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THE DISTORTED VIEW ON SCIENCE. ON THE WEAKNESS OF JOURNALISM AND THE STRENGTH OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

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Abstract

Science and technology are presently facing an acceptance crisis. One strategy to counter the lack of acceptance consists in strengthening public relations. The efforts of scientific institutions to boost their PR work meets with a period of weakness on the side of journalism. The number of published units is decreasing, competition between publishing houses is diminishing. Editorial departments are being reduced, journalistic spheres of competence outsourced, specialized editorial departments are shut down. On the other hand we are confronted with a growing number of PR workers. Public relations to a growing extent copies journalistic methods and exerts influence on journalists. Regarding the coverage of science in particular, one can state that the evaluation criteria of scientists leave their mark on the coverage of science journalism. This paper gathers some indicators for these general tendencies. Especially the illegitimate methods of taking influence shall be scrutinized and discussed.

Key Words: Science journalism, public relations, science coverage.

Text

For a long time science was perceived as something positive and presented favorably in the media. In the mid-seventies perception and media coverage became more critical (Kepplinger 1989, Bauer et al. 1995). Certain practices were no longer accepted by the population. Science and technology had gotten into an acceptance crisis. Scientists and researchers felt compelled to justify their work and campaign for more public support.

But this strengthening of public relations occurs in a quite peculiar situation, one might call it the weak phase of journalism. This weakness of journalism as a phenomenon is true for journalism as a whole and for science journalism in particular: Editorial staff is being reduced, spheres of competence are being outsourced, and PR products replace journalistic products without being sufficiently identified as PR.

In communication science, the relationship between journalism and public relations has recently been conceptualized by the determination hypothesis: "The more influence public relations gain, the less influence can be attributed to journalism and vice versa" (Baerns 1991, 17). In public communication, journalism and public relations have to fulfil different purposes. Journalists construct 'true realities' on the basis of constitutional preconditions and Public Relations create 'desirable realities' for the sake of the customer. Both, journalism and PR, have to play different roles. Nevertheless, recent developments seem to counterpoise this functionally important distinction between both communication systems.

Present statistics give proof of the decreasing number of published units and the resulting decrease of competing publishing houses. Traditional newspapers are threatened by advertising papers and free-of-charge newspapers. In 1980, the advertising papers already reached 700 titles, in 1998, their number amounted to 1,300 titles with an edition of 85 million copies (Rager 1999).

Editorial staff and journalistic spheres of competence are being outsourced. At the "Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung", specialized editorial departments were closed down and replaced by centralized editorial offices delivering theme pages like "health", "automobile", or "computer" to all regional newspapers (Röper 1997, 54).

The following tendencies may stand as proof for the growing influence of public relations:

- The number of PR workers grows dynamically
- Public relations increasingly copies journalistic working methods
- Public relations increasingly uses journalistic personnel
- Concerning science journalism: Evaluation criteria of the scientific community influence media coverage

The following figures show the development of personnel working in public relations: At the time being Germany has an estimated 60,000 journalists and 30,000 PR specialists. The number of PR workers is growing dynamically and is supposed to be reaching 50,000 in 2005.

Press information and PR kits are increasingly often presented in a journalistically useful style, so they can be directly integrated into the print system or broadcasting schedule without any further processing. In an analysis specifically dealing with science coverage Barbara Baerns comes up with the result: Two thirds of the science coverage of news agencies are based on information from public relations (Baerns 1990, 47). One might consider this a precarious and somehow imbalanced proportion. Because it means that only one third of science coverage is due to independent research of journalists.

The evaluation criteria of the science community influence journalistic coverage by their publishing habits and the accompanying public relations. In

a survey, Carola Pahl analyzed half a year of medical coverage on the science pages of eight nationwide daily and weekly newspapers in Germany (Pahl 1997, 10).

The survey researched the sources of almost 1,200 articles on medical topics. 450 could be directly derived from an article in a professional scientific journal, which equals to almost 40 percent of the total coverage. Interestingly, the source was not always mentioned. Only about 80 percent of the articles referring to a specialized publication bothered to mention their source. Most of the articles followed a simple principle by only summarizing what was said in the journal article.

Journals with a high "impact factor" get the most quotations among all journalistically processed scientific journals. The impact factor shows how often an article in a journal is quoted in other professional publications. In other words, it indicates the reputation of a journal within the scientific community.

By adhering to the publishing practice of the scientific community, journalistic coverage also copies its evaluation criteria. But the accompanying public relations also influence the media coverage. The professional journals usually issue press information, especially on articles they consider important. Additionally, these publications are highlighted in the respective journal's editorial. Analysis has shown that such highlighted articles very often become the basis of a newspaper article. Thus, press information and editorial comments substantially influence the subject selection of newspaper editors.

In the following some tendencies shall be highlighted that prove the increase in illegitimate forms of taking influence:

- Hidden sponsoring and subsidies
- Employing and influencing journalistic personnel
- No transparency in usage of PR material
- PR in pseudo-journalistic shape

Public as well as privately owned television and broadcasting stations are presently outsourcing editorial planning and production processes. In most cases, the most inexpensive bids are accepted, that quite often cannot even cover the production costs. Knowingly or unknowingly, both sides take into account that the producers will have to look for other funds to finance the project. As a consequence, radio or TV broadcasts are being sponsored by third parties, either by coverage in favor of a certain product or by seemingly accidental name dropping or demonstrations of a product. Sponsors often aren't even mentioned by name, but they influence the choice of topics and the tendency of coverage. W. Göpfert (1990) and Busche (1998) have discussed plenty of examples. This mixing of journalism with PR is by no means a new phenomenon, it has happened before. But never before has this tendency been accelerating like it is today.

A recent example may demonstrate to what extent public relations for science considers the assumption of journalistic tasks as a matter of course: At the "Badische Zeitung" in Freiburg, once a week the reports on science and research were no longer written by journalists. The newspaper leaved this task to the local university. The press office of the university edits the paper's science page and fills it with own news and articles. The credits on the science page mention the press office as an "editorial". However journalistic science coverage still exists but it is in parts being replaced by public relations. There are other examples: The weekly science page of the "Vancouver Sun", for instance, is created by the local "H. R. Macmillan Space Centre". The page is layouted like a regular newspaper page, and bears the centre's logo at the bottom.

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SCIENTIFIC JOURNALISM AND CITIZENSHIP RIGHTS

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Abstract

Journalism is a gender of knowledge, a way to understand the world and to make the life better. We study this knowledge like as professional work for improve the citizenship rights (see C. Abramo).

When the scientific journalist works to improve the population health, he has to make choices. He is a citizen (see T. Marshall), he has values (see A. Heller), knows how to be journalist. His knowledge has to be specific and his ethical values it can be the opposite of others knowledge, for example the medical. In this way, journalist work for human's health rights, he must know what is the science and its economic values in the capitalism.

Key words: journalism, citizen participation, health and medicine.

Text

Context: Journalism is a way of making new concepts of life. Many scientific journalists works only for business, but it could be different. The press has a hard mission to improve the best knowledge. And also the press has a mission to improve a new ethics and new values for the health for all people.

Objective: It must build a new concept of scientific journalism, an independent journalism with specific rules and special knowledge. How we can do it in scientific journalism?

Methods: This is a interdisciplinary research with history (cf. A. Heller), ethics and journalism (cf. C. Abramo) and citizenship (cf. Marshall). History is a construction of values (cf. Heller). The citizenship rights are values, but it is a work in progress, during more than two hundred years (cf. Marshall, Bobbio, Gentilli, Hirschmann). We see this situation in some cases studies about citizenship and scientific journalism (cf. M.O.Bocchini; M. Siqueira). The historical and cultural background is a way to study brazilian press and its news about hormonal therapy for women.

Results: The alternative texts what were written against the majority press, were critical about hormonal therapy for women. (cf. site Observatorio da Imprensa).The majority of critical news and articles about hormonal therapy were written by feminists: doctors, like Fátima de Oliveira (cf. REPOSIÇÃO HORMONAL - A imolação de mulheres na busca da eterna juventude (HORMONAL THERAPY – the women sacrifice for eternal youth); or presswomen at a non governmental organization, SOF – Sempre viva

Organização Feminista (cf. Mulher e Saúde (Women and Health), March, 2002, no. 28).

Conclusions: Journalism depends on historical and cultural conditions. Some conditions are: an ethical basis of citizenship and knowledge about science and journalism. We can say an independent scientific journalism is possible.

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b) Media

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Parallel Session 10: Science communicator, is it a good profession?

**ENHANCING SCIENCE COVERAGE BY COLABORATING WITH
NEWSPAPER COMPANY**

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Abstract

Newspaper and television are the main source for getting scientific information for the lay people. This is a one year report on collaborating endeavor with newspaper companies as well as broadcasting companies in Korea. Through this, we enhance the visibility as well as the accessibility of science among the general people and the opinion leaders. Along this, this paper will show the reality of science coverage in Korea.