Teaching University Students to Publicize Science

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According to the 2010 census data, less than 1% of the United States population works in the life, physical, or social sciences (BLS, 2011). Except for the medical profession, the number of workers in other fields of scientific study are just as low. This means that most people do not read scientific journals or attend scientific conferences. The public learns about science from the news media (NSF, 2004), yet few professional journalists are trained scientists. The divide between science and media can result in inaccurate reporting and the spread of misconceptions.

During my years as a science journalist for the student newspaper at Univeristy of California-Davis (UC-Davis), I learned how to report on science and instruct others on how to report science. At the same time, I worked in a laboratory with professional scientists. From these two experiences, I saw the divide between media and science from both sides.

There are two parts to this article. In Part 1 I explain why it is important for scientists and journalists to communicate. In Part 2 I provide classroom lessons that can help both scientists and student journalists explain science to a lay audience.

Please note that some of the material in this article is adapted from previous posts on the American Society of Animal Science (ASAS) Graduate BULLetin and the UC-Davis newspaper, The California Aggie (McCurry-Schmidt, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). Because I wrote this when I was a writer for ASAS, some issues are framed using animal science examples.

Despite their different roles in society, the relationship between scientists and journalists is symbiotic. Journalists want to report on fascinating news, and science can provide plenty of that. Scientists want to share their findings, and journalists can provide an outlet for that. The purpose of this article is to examine the issues reporters and researchers face when trying to communicate with the public. By understanding these issues, students and instructors can improve science journalism training at the university level.

**MERGING SCIENCE AND COMMUNICATION**

Talking to Reporters Can Help Scientists Share Knowledge and Get Funding

Although you know your project is interesting and newsworthy, how do you convey that to the media? First I want to explain why you should be publicizing your own research. There are two reasons: share knowledge and secure future funding.

In many ways, animal scientists work to improve food security and animal health—two very important issues. If you don’t get news of your discoveries out there, no one can apply that knowledge. New discoveries can also influence public policy. For example, some states right now are considering new guidelines for hen housing.

To answer questions about hen welfare, scientists are studying the pros and cons of different housing systems (Feedstuffs, 2011). But if the findings of this study never make it to voters or legislators, they will be very difficult to use in informed policy decisions. Communication is key.

Publicizing research can also help you get funding for the future. When “hot topic” issues—food safety, for example—reach the public, funding agencies like the National Institutes of Health (NIH) are motivated to start funding research. And although publishing in journals gets your name out to fellow scientists, publishing in other outlets (say Drovers Cattle Network or Animal Agriculture Alliance) can get your name to people in the industry.

This brings us to tips for publicizing research.

1. Contact your university press office. Most universities will have a press office that covers programs and science on campus. You can usually find contact information for these offices by going to the university home page and then clicking on a link for “news” or “media.” The writers in the press office are there to promote the work of the university, so they are motivated to write about your project. Just give them a brief description of your work and your contact information. These university press releases often get picked up by other press outlets.

2. Contact your student newspaper. When I was a science writer and editor for my student newspaper at UC-Davis, I was thrilled when scientists contacted me about their research. They found out about the student newspaper if you can supply photographs. Plus, student journalists are newbies, yes, but they’re also incredibly enthusiastic about their work. Students and instructors can improve science journalism training at the university level.