

A View from the Newsroom: Science Communication Lessons Learned While Reporting on Artificial Floods and Other Newsworthy Topics

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Scientific research plays “a major role in key political, economic, cultural and social policy discussions, as well as in public dialogue,” according to the Science Literacy Project. But in an era of “alternative facts,” advocating for an evidence-based approach to decision making has become increasingly important, as has successfully reaching decision makers and the public, who must understand the research underpinning numerous geoscience-related issues with important societal ramifications in order to make informed decisions.

While there is much that individual scientists can do to disseminate their research and promote civil discourse, including holding public talks, exploiting social media, and writing for popular audiences, these are time-consuming endeavors. In addition, communicating with a lay audience is a skill; it’s easy to become entangled in jargon, and there are often gaps between what scientists assume the public knows and what it actually does.

Fortunately, scientists and science journalists are perfectly positioned to help one other. Journalists, through succinct and accurate reporting, can bring a wide variety of topics to the attention of decision makers, other scientists, and the general public, while scientists’ research provides the raw material for journalists to present. Yet the impact of these painstaking efforts on both sides is diminished if no one is listening — or watching, reading, or tweeting.

Expanding the audience that follows geoscience developments benefits geoscientists, journalists, and, most of all, the public. In this presentation I will explore the dynamics of science communication from a geoscience journalist’s perspective, focusing on methods to mutually engage our audiences and expand our reach. A key technique is storytelling: constructing a narrative that grabs and holds the audience’s attention while simultaneously describing first-order scientific concepts in a way that the audience can relate to and that sticks with them.

One of the easiest ways to acquire the insight necessary to write an informative and captivating story is to visit a researcher onsite. In the geosciences, this is often in the field, and that is why in 2012 the EGU established an annual Science Journalism Fellowship, which provides funding specifically for reporters to accompany researchers in the field.

As a recent recipient, I travelled to Switzerland to report on how large dams, which severely disrupt the ecosystems within which they’re placed, are now being used as ecological restoration tools via manmade water releases known as “artificial floods.” I will discuss how I approached this complex topic and wove the various threads into a narrative as well as additional examples from my own and other science journalists’ efforts to make geoscience topics more palpable—and more popular.