Scientists vs. Journalists?
Obligations, Risks and Benefits of Communicating Science to the Public
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**Introduction**
Scientists, for many reasons, aren’t always the best communicators. Yet, communication skills are vital when informing the public about research and scientific developments. This process involves scientists, the public and the media institutions through which they connect. The relationship between these groups is a subject of many studies and discussions. Scientists and journalists have come to the ground. They both are investigators, analysts, and examiners of information in a world of rapid progress and lightning-quick communication. Many scientists feel an aversion to working with the media—a trait possibly resulting from poor training in communicating with laypeople or feeling based on past experiences. Interviewing scientists at the University of Missouri about experiences with the media and communications with the public. Open-ended questions allowed scientists to provide extensive details and anecdotal evidence about the complexities of communication. Determining obligations, risks, and benefits may help maximize exposure of research done at the university level and lead to better utilization of scientific discoveries and applications.

**Interview Highlights**
- An M.D. came up to me and asked if dogs can get diabetes, and I said, “Of course...” But then it clicked: not everybody knows that. Then we went on a crusade (to communicate our research).
  
  Dr. Charles Weidemann, Assistant Professor of Clinical Pathology
- “It’s quite important in the 21st century that we have scientists engaged in the communications profession. You can limit or eliminate misconceptions.”
  
  Dr. Kellie Kutt, Curator’s Distinguished Professor of Physics and Radiology

**Methods**
The following steps were taken to gain qualitative information about the views of MU researchers on communicating the public and the media.

**Contact Sample Population**

candidates were selected and contacted.
Seven scheduled interviews.

**Interview Questions**
1. Briefly, what has been the focus of your research in the past and currently?
2. Describe your experience with media coverage and reporting on the subject promoted by the MU News Bureau.
   a. How do you feel about the reporting process? Did reporters understand your work?
   b. Did reporters communicate your research objectively and accurately?
3. Were there results from the public, other media sources or within academia from MU News Bureau reports?
4. Do you feel the public has an interest or should have an interest in your work?
5. What are the risks and benefits of communicating your research?
6. Do scientists have an obligation to communicate their work? To whom? Why?

**Results**
Interviewing scientists about public and media interactions revealed surprising results. The interviewees had a high variability in their experience and comfort levels when working with the media. Two subjects and additional training in how to work with the media would be beneficial, others indicated that a language barrier exists. In general, while the interviews had misconstrued scientists’ work at times, in most cases the mistakes journalists made were corrected before stories were printed, the interviews reported. However, sometimes scientific work was misrepresented, results were hyped or the work explained incorrectly.

Six of the seven subjects explicitly said communication is an obligation of scientists. The other subject said that communicating research is beneficial, and scientists should enjoy doing it even if they do not possess great communication skills.

Subj. had different justifications for why they communicated, usually referencing public education because the people are taxpayers and voters. The public paid for the research and the public has a right to know what is going on, interested or not, according to one subject. Also, scientists communicate to correct misinformation and to spread research and knowledge.

**Conclusions**
Creating new information as a scientist is a requirement, and most researchers said that spreading this information is a primary goal of scientists.

As a small quantitative study, conclusions of this research project are limited. Larger study should be conducted encompassing a greater number of researchers at the university level. However, the present study was useful in that it suggested many scientists at the University of Missouri believe in the obligation and importance of communicating about their research.

Several subjects indicated that scientists require more training not only in communication skills, but also in the mechanics of the media industry. In general, despite the risks, working with the media is very beneficial in communicating.

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**Literature Cited**