

LETTERS TO YOUNG SCIENTISTS



What we've learned from communicating our science during the pandemic

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By **Esther Choo**, **Neil A. Lewis, Jr.** | Feb. 3, 2021, 4:00 PM

In April 2020, our email inboxes and Twitter accounts blew up with messages from journalists asking questions about the COVID-19 pandemic. They reached out to us because we both study health disparities—Esther from a medical perspective, Neil from a social science perspective—and regularly communicate about those topics on social media. Neither of us had expertise on pandemics specifically, but when it became clear that communities of color were being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, we were called upon to give our perspective on the problem.

The requests were daunting at first because we weren't sure whether we had relevant expertise. The pandemic was still new, so we did not always feel prepared to answer the questions journalists were asking us—questions that sometimes went beyond our specific research programs. But as time went on and more data accumulated, it became clear that many of the same factors that produced the health disparities we've spent our careers studying also seemed to be driving COVID-

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lessons we've learned.

Engage on social media

One of the problems in modern times is that, as Nathan Robinson put it, "the truth is paywalled but the lies are free." Scientists have so much knowledge to share with the world, but so often we keep it to ourselves—locked away in jargon-filled journals that live behind expensive paywalls; meanwhile, propagandists spew misinformation for free. One way to address this problem is for scientists to be visible and active on social media. Doing so comes with **challenges**, but by participating in the spaces where people are having active discussions, you can help to fill the information void and (hopefully) frame issues before speculation and misinformation become widespread. You may also come to better understand what the general public is confused, uncertain, or curious about and the kind of communication strategies that are most effective in reaching a nonscientific audience. As you gain visibility, your posts may help journalists find you, leading to more opportunities to communicate science to a wider audience.

Think broadly about your expertise

It can be scary when a journalist contacts you out of the blue asking you to share your expertise. Your immediate reaction may be to say no, especially if the request isn't directly relevant to your research, but we encourage you to stop and think before doing so. If they reached out to you, it's because they recognize you as an expert—and it's possible your expertise will be valuable in ways you haven't foreseen. For example, Neil was invited to interview for a podcast recently. The focus was vaccine

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reminder that sometimes others recognize the value of your voice, even if you don't see it yourself.

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Take time to prepare

Ahead of speaking with a journalist, take some time to think through and even write down your key points in everyday language. Avoid jargon and acronyms and be prepared to break down complex concepts in ways nonscientific audiences will understand—for example, by using an analogy. It's important to think about what you want to say in advance because if you speak off the cuff, you run the risk of saying something you'll regret or failing to communicate your key messages. You can sometimes even ask interviewers to share their questions in advance so you can prepare answers; not all will be able to share them, but some will.

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Be flexible

Even if you go into a media interview with specific points you want to make, you should stay flexible and open to answering questions you didn't anticipate, even ones that go beyond the science. For instance, you may be asked, "What do you think policymakers should do with this

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expertise as a scientist and when you are not.

Don't tread into territory you're unsure about

There may be a broad range of topics you feel comfortable speaking about, but if the interviewer goes beyond that, there's nothing wrong with saying "I don't know the answer" or "This other expert would be a better person to answer that question." Because the truth is, you don't have to be an expert on everything. Failing to acknowledge that—and going out on a limb and answering a question anyway—can negatively impact your credibility and the public's understanding of the science. Esther dealt with that problem a few times over the past year because she's been asked to comment on everything from details about how viruses behave, to the crisis in hospitals, to the effectiveness of medications for treating COVID-19. When the questions veered into realms that she didn't feel qualified to speak about, she made a point of limiting answers to points most closely related to her own clinical and public health expertise.

Embrace the process of science

Even in well-established areas of science, there is usually some debate and uncertainty. Scientists accept that as a given, but it's important to recognize that very process—largely obscured from view in the halls of academia—can be puzzling and even worrisome to the public. Why are scientists arguing about this study? Why can't they seem to make up their minds? Does the conflict mean there's fraud on one side or the other? When speaking with the media, therefore, it's important to not only focus on the main research finding; you should also think about how to

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work of scientists over the course of a few months.

Seek out training

Unfortunately, scientific expertise alone does not mean you're naturally skilled to confer information to a broad audience. Communication is a skill set like any other, and it takes time to develop. So, despite our best efforts to give you advice, you may find that your first experiences with journalists don't go as well as you may expect. Don't feel bad; **even experienced interviewees sometimes run into problems** or walk away from an interview feeling as though they didn't answer questions as confidently or skillfully as they would've liked. We recommend developing your skill set by taking part in training opportunities offered by your university, scientific society, or other organizations. Neil has done so for years, first by taking part in a conference about how to engage the general public and policymakers and later by attending workshops aimed at honing the communication skills of scientists. Through those opportunities, he did mock interviews with journalists and learned how to tailor messages for different outlets, lessons that were not explicitly taught in his Ph.D. program. His interviews still don't go perfectly all the time, but he feels much more confident thanks to the training, especially when he gets a request for an urgent interview and needs to prepare quickly.

We are currently living in a moment that has underscored the importance of scientific information—for the sake of our health, our systems of welfare, and the functioning of our civic society. It is more important than ever for scientists to add our voices to the public dialogue. We hope the tips here will help you do so.

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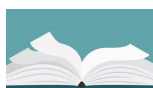
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