Building Trust Between Scientists and Journalists Can Help Restore Public Trust in Science and Journalism

Joan Meiners, Ph.D.

Climate reporter, *The Arizona Republic*

Wednesday, May 13, 2026 – NASA HAQAST Meeting

We have a shared problem.

1. Dis/misinformation is everywhere.
2. Real journalism is declining.
3. Journalists are losing access to scientists (government gag orders).
4. Scientists are spread thin and wary of their science being distorted.

We all recognize that *dis/misinformation* is eroding trust in both science and media. And we know that has consequences.

To combat disinformation (e.g. fossil fuel industry), journalists can:

- Fact-check
- Publish accountability journalism

Unintentional miscommunications usually happen when:

- The scientist isn't clear.
- The journalist misinterprets.
- Something else happens in the reader's brain.

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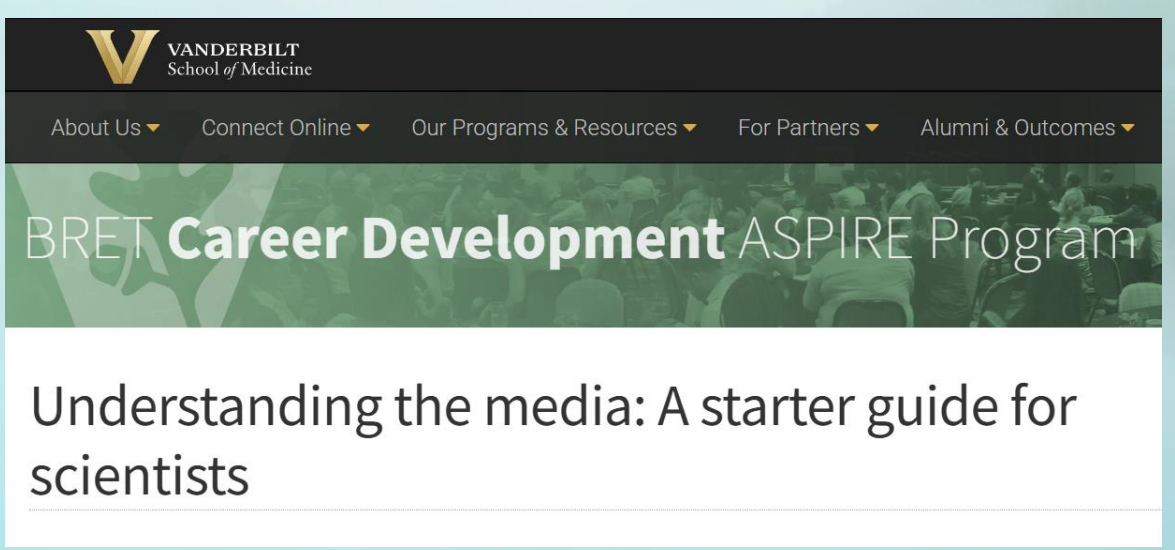
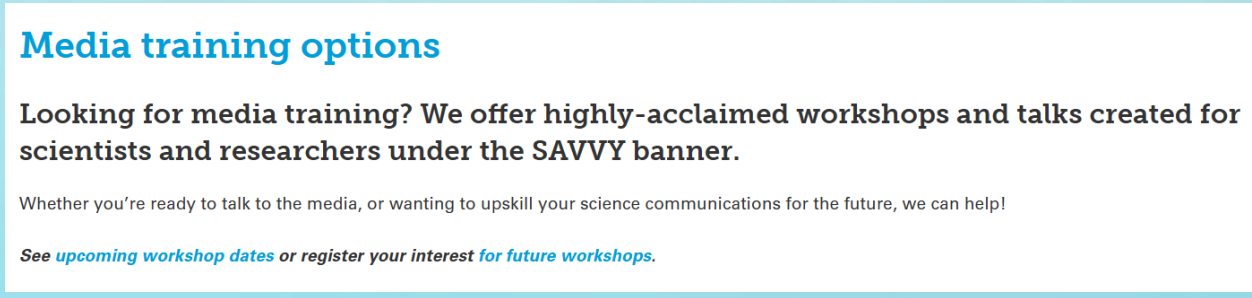
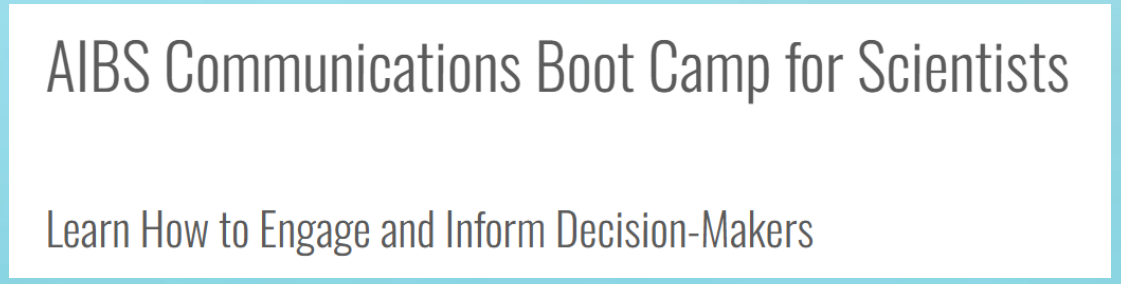
Media or Communications Training for Scientists







Why Scientists Need Media Training

Kenna Hughes-Castleberry Follow 5 min read · May 10, 2023

The goal of media training is to prepare scientists to speak to the media and the public in a clear, concise, and engaging way. This means distilling complex concepts into simple terms, avoiding technical jargon, and conveying the significance of their research in a way that is relatable and relevant to the public.

As a Ph.D. student in macroecology, I attended one of those media training workshops.

I was “trained” to:

- Be careful what I say to journalists because it could be misused to further a reporting agenda.
- Stick to the basics so the journalist can understand.
- Avoid nuance and complexity because that will just cause confusion.

Often the training = vilifying jargon

Choose Your Words

Tritrophic is not a real word. Your reader does not know the words *tritrophic, ecological assemblage, genomics* or *parthenogenesis*. That is not because your reader is dumb. It is because scientists made up those words and never told anyone but other scientists. Don't underestimate the intelligence of your readers. Readers can be very clever, but it is not their job to know all of the words that you and the twelve people you call colleagues made up.

"Advice for Scientists Who Want to Write" by Rob Dunn (NCSU)

yourwildlife.org/2013/06/advice-for-scientists-who-want-to-write-for-the-public/

I dislike this advice, because *just* avoiding jargon is boring and doesn't solve very much.

- All words are made up.
- The point of science journalism is to teach people something.

Obviously, moderation is required. You still need to know your audience and not introduce too many new words at a time.

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The point: Not all readers are the same.
And not all writers are the same.

The fix: Know who you are talking to.

- For journalists, that's our audience.
- For scientists, that's your journalist.

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The argument

- Yes, inexperienced, lazy, or rushed **journalists** make mistakes.
- Yes, some could have malicious or “click bait” intent.
- But many know and care more than you might think.

You spending 10 minutes learning the difference is a *WAY* better solution than just gatekeeping the interesting parts of science.

Before I interview a scientist, I:

- Look at their institution or personal webpage.
- Look at their Google Scholar page.
- Skim a couple of their papers. (Or read it in depth if the interview is about that.)
- Google them:
  - Do they have much of a public online presence?
  - Have they shared any fringe opinions?
  - Have they written op-eds or been quoted saying something controversial?
  - Does anything alarming pop up? (Allegations, etc.)

Before you are interviewed as a scientist, I'd recommend you:

- Look at the journalist's staff or personal webpage. (Have they been writing for *Scientific American* or for some weird blog, e.g.?)
- Note their background. (LinkedIn, etc.)
- Skim a couple of their stories. (How in-depth are they?)
- Google them:
  - What topics do they tend to write about, and how do they frame them?
  - Do you detect any biases?
  - Does anything alarming pop up?

I get that you're busy.
We are too. (The news cycle is fast!)

But doing this quick search will help you:

- manage the risk of malicious or inept coverage
  (just decline that interview!)
- prepare and reduce stress
- facilitate better journalism
- enjoy the process of sharing your science!

In interviews, I've had scientists:

- ask me to remind them which outlet I write for
- spend time on a concept I don't need explained (peer-review, statistical significance)
- brush off more complex questions (about methods, e.g.)

→ missed opportunities for better knowledge exchange

Which brings us back to:

The point: Not all readers are the same.
And not all writers are the same.

The fix: Know who you are talking to.

The result: Better science journalism,
Lower scientist stress
Improved public information

→ toward restoring trust in both science and journalism

The take-home advice: Know your journalist.

It's *our job* to know how much detail we can give our audience.

It's *your job* to know how much detail you can give your journalist.

Your *informed* trust in specific journalists can both protect you and open up opportunities for more nuanced coverage about how cool your science is.

Get in touch: joan.meiners@arizonarepublic.com