

The Changing Landscape of **SCIENCE JOURNALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Research sheds light on the complex relationships between science journalists, scientists, and institutional communicators

Science journalism is a vital component of informing the public about scientific advancements and discoveries.

However, today's changing media landscape has resulted in a significant challenge for science journalism. Economic pressures have led to a reduction in resources available for news reporting, and the rise of corporate communication and public relations (PR) has seen institutional science communication become a booming industry, bypassing the traditional roles of journalists.

To better understand how science journalists are navigating these changes, researchers from Stellenbosch University and City University of London conducted a [study](#) partly funded by the NRF. The study involved in-depth interviews with 20 South African science journalists.

Journalists' relationships with scientists

The study found that science journalists are generally appreciative of the roles and functions of scientists and institutional communicators in the science news cycle. However, the relationship between science journalists and scientists is complex. The journalists recognised the importance of building positive, professional, and trusting relationships with scientists as sources of information. They also indicated that building relationships and databases of scientists takes years and is an ongoing and mutual process. The unavailability or lack of response from scientists posed a barrier to journalists doing their job. Younger journalists and those working for smaller media outlets struggled more since scientists preferred to be interviewed by well-known journalists that they know and trust or by journalists working for prestigious media outlets.

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Importance of institutional communicators and role in helping science journalists

Institutional communicators at universities and research institutions played an important role in providing access to scientists and their research. The competence and media skills of institutional communicators were paramount to ensuring the supply of relevant and newsworthy information. However, organisational rules and procedures, as well as government bureaucracy and red tape, were noted as enablers that constrained the effectiveness of institutional communicators. The journalists expressed the need to hold scientists to account and verify the information they provide.

Concerns over PR influences

Churnalism or 'copy-and-paste' journalism was seen as a threat to the science journalism profession. The study highlights that the prevalence of churnalism may be a result of under-resourced newsrooms and time

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pressures experienced by too few specialist journalists. The journalists noted that the vacuum in science journalism was increasingly being filled by institutional communicators who are able to provide ready-to-use media copy. This practice was seen as problematic as these articles are written to serve the interests of particular institutions, instead of public interests.

Given that the traditional boundaries between science journalism and institutional science communication are increasingly uncertain and porous, the study affirms the importance of maintaining the integrity of science journalism and that journalists should continue to hold scientists and institutions accountable for their research and its societal implications and applications, even as the media landscape evolves. 



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