A Guide for African Science Media Officers

October 2011

Foreword

Good reporting of science in the media is vital in drawing the attention of both policymakers and the public to the important role that science and technology can play in achieving sustainable development, and press officers can contribute significantly to helping science journalists ensure that this happens. This guide provides a comprehensive introduction to the techniques that press officers can use to create a close and supportive working relationship with the journalist community. It deserves to be widely read – and followed – in African institutions.

***David Dickson**, editor SciDevNet*

In 2008 Stempra, a support network for press and public relations (PR) practitioners working in science in the UK, drew up a set of 'best practice' guidelines. The intention was to help us communicate science responsibly, to walk the fine line between generating interest in a story and over-selling it. This is a reworking for a new continent and a new era.

Science is not always simple, but achieving accurate reporting for your institute's research is not rocket science. This guide aims to help press officers to navigate some of the issues that can arise in science PR. We hope it will provide a useful starting point, and stimulate discussion among the science press officer community.

***Ruth Francis**, Chair, Stempra*

"Good media coverage of the research done at our university is an essential tool for us to build our university's brand, to strengthen our reputation as a research-focused institution and to demonstrate our relevance to our stakeholder communities. This helps us to compete for funding, collaborators and top postgraduate students."

Winton Windell, reputation manager, North-West University, Potchefstroom campus, South Africa

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Introduction

Media coverage can help to raise the profile of your researchers and your institute. It can raise public awareness, influence policy agendas, attract funding and recruit collaborators and students. If your institute is funded by the tax payer, you may have an obligation to make your research known to the public. The public needs accessible science coverage to help them make informed decisions, especially when scientific issues affect lives. Journalists, on the other hand, need compelling science stories that will interest their audience. Effective collaboration between scientists, journalists and media officers therefore stands to benefit all three parties, as well as the general public. As a science media officer, you are vital to the science communication process. Your work can make a big difference to the quality, frequency and impact of media coverage that your institute gets.

A professional media officer:

- **Has a media policy and strategy in place and invests time in reviewing and updating it regularly**
- **Ensures that researchers and top management buy into the media strategy and encourages them to allocate appropriate resources**
- **Is up to date on leading research projects within the institution and able to identify newsworthy developments and media opportunities**
- **Develops a targeted media contact list and updates it continuously**
- **Builds good working relationships with journalists but never "overshares" information with them and says nothing "off the record"**
- **Understands how the media operates**
- **Is never offended if a journalist does not cover their story**
- **Obtains all relevant approvals from researcher, managers, funders and collaborators before going public**
- **Sends regular coverage reports to management and relevant researchers**
- **Networks with journalists and other media officers by joining relevant discussion lists, networks and associations**

The role of the science media officer

Scientists and journalists live in very different worlds. Journalists sometimes accuse scientists of speaking in jargon, and being inaccessible. Scientists feel that the media either misunderstands or deliberately misrepresents them and their science. As a vital link between them, you have to understand how both science and the media work. This is often a demanding balancing act.

You need to understand how the media works – how news flows in the newsroom, the roles of journalists and editors, why deadlines are so short and so immovable, as well as the constraints and limitations of what reporters can do. Speak to journalists about the challenges they face and ask them about how their newspaper, magazine or radio programme is put together. Whilst it is important to build good relationships with the media, journalists and media officers should not be too close. Journalists are the public's watch dogs, not uncritical regurgitators of your press materials.

Scientists are often unaware of the news value of their research and it is up to you to get to know their research and spot newsworthy stories from reports, papers and meetings or from talking directly to them. You should then package and frame your science story for maximum media appeal, without compromising accuracy and avoiding hype. Convince both researchers and senior management of the need to respond to media opportunities – often at short notice – and get them to be available for interviews. An important part of your job is then to prepare the scientist for the interview. You are also the first point of call for enquiries from the media. It is your job to know exactly how to respond, and to do it fast.

The media officer must also develop an "enabling" media policy at the institution where he/she works that supports and encourages scientists to communicate their work via the mass media. If you can convince your bosses to recognise and reward your "science media stars" for their efforts, even better. They are, after all, helping to build the image and reputation of your organisation.

African science media officers face particular challenges in achieving media coverage and recognition for African research in their own countries, on the African continent and around the globe. Contributing factors may be a lack of science journalism capacity in some countries, audience diversity and intense competition from science news services in other regions.

"I may not have time to visit all the researchers at the university where I work, but I speak to them at every possible opportunity. I have picked up amazingly newsworthy stories from speaking to scientists in the elevator or cafeteria"

Shirona Patel, communication manager at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Thinking strategically

Ask yourself these questions before you act:

1. **What are you trying to achieve by promoting this research?**

   Think about the intention or desired outcome of a specific media initiative. Are you aiming to raise the profile of your institution and its academics? Are you trying to foster informed debate?

2. **Why are you promoting this research now?**

   We often promote research because there is a particular development or news hook, such as a paper appearing in a journal. If the story comes about because of a presentation at a conference or because of a journalist's visit to your institution, the science may not have been published in a peer-reviewed journal. Could speaking about the research now affect the academic's chances of publishing in a high-impact journal? Should you wait until the research has been peer-reviewed? If the research is particularly controversial, is it better to be proactive or reactive?

3. **What are the key messages?**

   Distil the essence of what you want to communicate. Think about who will be interested or affected and why it would matter to them. Ask yourself why people would/should care and how they may be able to benefit from or use the information.

4. **Who else is involved?**

   Are all the key stakeholders – researchers, funders, collaborators etc. – on board with the idea of media promotion? Do you know how to get the relevant approval from their organisation? Does their press office need to be kept up to date?

5. **How might people react to reading about this research?**

   Have you prepared for the potential consequences?

"Remember that science can be economics too … and science can even be politics – it all depends on how you present it. The media officer must find the most effective way to tailor a science story to fit the needs of a specific journalist or media outlet."

Ochieng' Ogodo, Sub-Saharan Africa news editor, SciDev.Net

Promoting research responsibly

Science is not always easy to understand and making sense of conflicting scientific claims can make it even more of a challenge. Science stories often include elements of risk, controversy or uncertainty. Is genetically modified maize safe to eat? Are biofuels good for the environment or bad? Is it safe to participate in a vaccine trial? Premature reporting or exaggerated claims of medical breakthroughs could give desperately ill people false hope of a cure.

There are a number of issues to consider when promoting research that may help journalists – and hence the public – make sense of the findings:

- Are the claims made in the press release supported by the peer-reviewed research published in a reputable scientific journal?
- Is the study well-designed? For example, is the sample size sufficiently large?
- How will you convey risk factors?
- Can you give realistic estimates of when a new drug/treatment might be available?
- Can you get a 'second opinion' about the significance of the work or the claims being made?
- Are there any potential conflicting interests? For example, was the research industry-funded? Industry funding does not mean that the research is necessarily biased, but it is good practice to declare the funding source.
- Who is the best spokesperson? (this might not be the lead author.)
- If debate exists around a certain topic, be ready to acknowledge it and explain why controversy exists.

Why does peer review matter?

When scientists submit their work for publication to an academic journal, it is scrutinised by their peers to assess its validity. Research findings that have been published in a peer-reviewed journal are therefore generally regarded as credible and trustworthy. This is a crucial stage in the scientific process. It is not a perfect system and does have its detractors, but most scientists – and science journalists – will agree that it ensures essential "quality control".

Is your story newsworthy?

It is essential to understand what journalists and news editors are looking for when they decide whether or not they are interested in a story. Immediacy, proximity, rarity and consequence are key news values, along with human interest. To judge the news worthiness of a story you are working on, ask yourself:

- Is it really new and significant information?
- Does it affect a large number of people?
- Is it controversial?
- Can it be linked to an issue that is currently making headlines or that many people are talking about?
- Does it relate to something that the audience is familiar with?
- Is it unusual, fascinating, weird, quirky or perhaps amusing?
- Does it have a strong human interest element?
- Is it particularly relevant or interesting to local people?
- Do I have striking images to go with this story?

If you cannot answer "yes" to any of the questions above, it is probably not worth bothering journalists with this story – you'll be wasting your time and also theirs.

Once you have a good story, you have to "translate" the seemingly complicated science into simpler language. Scientists are trained to write in an academic and impersonal style required by scientific journals, and usually find it hard to get away from the technical jargon of their discipline. Try to bring the facts to life with relevant analogies and metaphors. Can a strong quote from a passionate scientist enliven it? It may take some joint brainstorming and several revisions of the text before you have a story that would appeal to non-scientists. If you have time, pre-test the story with someone outside the field of research to check whether they understand it.

"In real life, people like talking about other people. Therefore the best way to tell a science story is to link it to people. These are the stories that attract interest and that people remember …"

Charles Wendo, editor: Saturday Vision, Uganda & Chair of Uganda Health Communication Alliance

Tactics, tools and timing

When is the best time to communicate a science news story?

There may be opportunities for communication throughout the life cycle of a research project. For example the start of an important new study, award of major funding, publication of a scientific paper, report or policy brief or a keynote talk at a high-profile conference.

What is the best way to get this story out?

There are many different ways to get the attention of the media. Press releases are widely used but are by no means the only way to reach journalists. Some options to consider include:

- **An exclusive interview** where you invite only one journalist to visit and interview the scientist. Be aware that other journalists may feel left out, especially if the interview is linked to hard news.
- **A press briefing** makes it possible for the researcher to see a number of journalists at the same time, but you can never guarantee how many will attend or how much coverage will result.
- **A media round table** makes it possible for a small group of scientists and journalists (ideally about three scientists and up to seven journalists) to explore the latest advances in a particular field of science, or to discuss controversial science topics face-to-face.
- **Media open days** allow you to invite journalists to visit your institute and meet scientists in person. It may work really well when you make sure that there are top scientists available in their labs – ready to be interviewed – and when you make an effort to create and promote good photo opportunities.
- **Science cafés** provide an opportunity for scientists to engage with the general public, but also provide journalists with an opportunity to report on the public's opinions and concerns around science, and the responses from scientists.
- **A captivating photo** with a good caption may actually get more attention than a text-only story.

"Press releases are a good source of information and often yield valuable story ideas, but access to the right scientists is even more valuable. This is where media officers can really help journalists – by identifying the best people to be interviewed and helping us to get hold of them."

William Odinga, journalist and head of the Ugandan Science Journalists Association

Writing the perfect press release

Press releases are still one of the best tools for reaching a large number of journalists. The art of writing a good press release lies in finding the news hook and making the science clear, relevant and accessible.

The layout of the press release must be easy to read with a bold headline, clear readable font, decent interline spacing, and logical formatting. Spend time crafting the headline of your press release – it must have impact and carry the most important message of the release. Then hit hard with your news angle in the first paragraph – the journalist must understand immediately what the news is – what has happened and why does it matter? Keep the length to 500–700 words.

Consider including:

- Information on the scope and impact of the research. For example: How many people are affected? Who are they?
- A human element, for example real case studies or interviews with affected individuals.
- A strong quote from an expert involved in the research.
- High-resolution photographs (or photo opportunities for local media), graphics and other illustrations
- Some form of recommendation: Now that we know what the situation is, what is the next step? What is going to be done about it?
- Notes to editors: This is extra background information that you add at the bottom of the release. It usually contains extra information about the research leaders and the organisations involved in the research.

The top 10 press release essentials

- **Embargo date and time (including time zone)**
- **Catchy title that explains the main point of the story**
- **First sentence that encapsulates the story**
- **First paragraph to explain the story and give the context**
- **Key questions to answer: What? Why? Who? How? When? Where?**
- **Name checks for relevant collaborators, funders, etc**
- **At least two strong quotes to add "colour"**
- **Comment from external organisation where appropriate, e.g. a relevant patient charity**
- **Contact details provide several options for contacting experts, including out-of-hours contacts**

Notes for editors:

- **Relevant boilerplates (paragraphs about each institution) and journal reference for paper, including link to an online preview copy, where appropriate**

Sending out your press release

Approvals: Make sure you have all the approvals you need, including from senior management, collaborating institutions and research funders. Make sure that your experts are available and ready to be contacted by journalists in the week following a press release.

Emailing etiquette: Put the press release in the body of your email. Don't add any attachments. Make it clear in the subject line what the contents of the email is. Your media list is confidential – so email to journalists one at a time or blind copy to a group.

Science news services: EurekAlert!, AlphaGalileo, PR Newswire and others provide an effective solution to reaching large media audiences around the world. Even if your organisation is not permanently subscribed, most news services offer the option to pay per posting.

Timing: Try and send out your press release early in the day, and early in the week. If your release is linked to an event, send it about three to four days before the event with an embargo. Avoid sending out press releases at the same time as other major news events, such as budget announcements or big sporting events.

Keep track of who covered the story, as this helps you to build relationships with interested journalists. Be sure to add them to your media list when you have future stories of a similar nature.

About embargoes

Use an embargo when you do not want information to be released before a specific date, but you want journalists to be able to prepare their stories in advance. This may be specifically useful with complex stories involving many role players. In the case of a news release on a soon-to-be-published article, the scientific journal may set an embargo. State the embargo date and time clearly in bold at the top of your release, including the full time, date and time zone. Some journalists do not like embargoed releases, as they feel that there is no scoop in it for them if everyone uses the same information on the same day. Others don't take press releases seriously unless they are embargoed, arguing that the words "for immediate release" at the top of a press release can be interpreted as "old news".

Working with journals

The publication of a newsworthy piece of research in a top-rated scientific journal is an excellent news hook for communicating research. Try and ensure that you know in advance when your institute's science will be published. If a relevant journal keeps a database of institutional media officers – make sure you are on it and sign on to the electronic alert systems of science journal databases. Remind the scientists that you work with to alert you about forthcoming articles in print. The journal may issue a press release, promoting publication of your scientist's paper to the press. If this happens work with the journal press office, providing them with any supporting materials you might have, such as:

- extra background information
- visuals (graphics, photos, videos)
- a list of potential interviewees, along with a note on what languages they can be interviewed in
- brief biographies of the leading researchers
- key quotes

From the way research articles are reported differently around the world, it can be seen that the media often likes to take a local angle. Media officers help provide these local perspectives – for example, how many people in your country are affected by a particular health problem being addressed by new science? Media officers can also warn journals of research outcomes that could possibly be misunderstood or reported incorrectly in a specific regional context.

If the journal concerned does not intend to issue a press release about a specific research article, this is your opportunity to do it yourself. You can start preparing for publicity as soon as an article has been accepted for publication, but do not allow journalists to publish their stories until after the journal publication date. Put the release under embargo until the date the article will be published.

"As African media officers, we must contextualise stories for Africans. We should know our audiences well enough to be aware of the issues in science that affect their daily lives so that we can tweak the content to make it relevant to them."

Justa Wawira, head of external relations, KEMRI-Wellcome Trust Research Programme, Kenya

Other opportunities for media coverage

Conferences: If a researcher from the institution where you work presents a paper at a high-profile scientific conference – especially if it is a keynote talk or invited paper – this could provide a valuable opportunity for coverage. Get in touch with the conference press office. Send them a press release based on the talk or a preview of the talk, as well as the usual supporting materials. Also send the press release – linked to the conference – directly to your own media contacts and arrange interviews with the researcher during or immediately after the conference.

When a relevant issue is already in the news, journalists are often looking for experts to comment or provide a local perspective. Make sure your media contacts know that they can call on you to identify a relevant expert. If you can help them to get quick access to scientists, they will definitely call on you again.

Special days, weeks or months that are commemorated annually – such as "World Food Day"; "World Environment Day" and "World Aids Day": Send out relevant press releases or suggest a researcher to be interviewed or profiled.

Features and profiles: Not all science stories needs to be hard news. It could be that some researchers are simply busy with fascinating work that may have public appeal, or there could be some news value in the scientists him/herself as an interesting person working in a noteworthy and relevant field of science or as leader of a big science project.

"Major natural phenomena such as earthquakes and tsunamis provide good news hooks for making science relevant and topical. Many scientists have a passion to share scientific information and will be keen to work with media officers on these stories."

Dr Alaa Ibrahim, American University in Cairo, Egypt

Pitching your story

When you are pitching a story to a journalist, whether in person or over the phone, you need to prepare thoroughly:

- Be polite – address the journalist by name and ask for a few minutes of their time.
- Be ready to convey the essence of the story and news angle within a few minutes, but also have more information on hand in case the journalists wants more background or examples.
- Your tone of voice and the way you deliver your message is important. Be enthusiastic and confident about the story you have to offer.
- Use personal pronouns such as "we" and "our researchers" to show ownership of the information and pride in your organisation.
- Cut the jargon. If the journalist does not immediately understand what you are talking about, they are unlikely to be interested in the story.
- Try to contextualise the information in terms of the target audience of the media outlet you are taking to and for the particular beat of the journalist involved. Give the story as much local flavour and relevance as possible.
- Stick to your message. Don't be side-tracked by irrelevant questions that the journalist might pose.
- Be honest if you can't answer a specific question, but offer to find the answer or refer the journalist to a relevant scientist.
- Don't overuse words such as "major" and "important", and especially do not use "breakthrough" – unless it really is a breakthrough!
- Send an email to confirm the story idea and contact details, and add all additional materials that you may have promised to send.

"Do not let go of the enthusiasm that you have garnered from a journalist during the telephone call. Have an expert lined up, and connect them right away. Be honest about the fact that you are not the expert, but confirm that you are able to help the journalist to get in touch with relevant researchers."

Jamie Guth, communication manager, World Health Organisation

The power of radio

Radio is a powerful medium with wide penetration across Africa. What is more, radio can get to news much faster than television – all you need is a telephone link to anywhere on the globe. Radio thrives on the imagination of the listener. When listening to radio, people create their own images in their heads, which is why it is often said that radio has the best pictures. Radio is also personal medium, addressing listeners one on one. To make the most of radio, you should:

- Identify the good verbal communicators in your organisation and the languages that they can be interviewed in.
- Invest in a good quality telephone line. If the person being interviewed can't be heard clearly, the clip may never be used.
- Provide radio journalists who attend an event – for example a science conference – with a quiet place to record interviews.
- Think of the languages that different radio stations may require. A scientist that can be interviewed in local languages or French as well as English can widen your African coverage.
- Write for the ear. Read your own text out loud. Beware of words that may confuse the listener, for example "genes" and "jeans".
- Keep messages on radio short, clear and snappy. Make it compelling, refreshing and challenging.
- Send pictures too. Radio shows often have an online presence and will welcome good visuals that they can post on their websites.
- Download radio interviews that are available as podcasts and use these to continue to promote a piece of research (for example via your organisation's website).

"Radio is alive and it lives in cars! Traffic jams – keeping people in their cars for several hours during peak traffic – are the best thing that could have happened to my industry."

Joseph Warungu, former BBC Africa Network editor, now working in Kenya as a journalist and trainer

Getting science news on television

Your ability to get television coverage may well hinge on the ability and willingness of experts to be available at short notice and to devote time to the media crew. Television journalists need more time to prepare for a story and a considerable amount of time may be taken up with filming and interviewing. This can be quite time-consuming and disruptive – make sure your researchers are aware of this. Think of the needs of television journalists if you are inviting them to a media event:

Think of props and interesting, moving things that they can film.

Make broadcast quality video clips available to back up the story – on your own server or even via YouTube. If these are in ready-to-use format for television, it will greatly increase the likelihood of being aired.

When you plan a press conference, don't put the speakers in front of a window, because it will make it difficult for television cameras to get good shots.

Organising a media event

A media event – for example a press briefing, an on-site demonstration or visit to a new laboratory – can work well to boost media interest and build relationships with journalists. Prepare enough press kits with background information including the full titles, names and affiliations of all the relevant scientists and collaborators. The participating scientists should be well prepared to offer short easy-to-understand talks and must be available for one-on-one interviews and photos afterwards – for as long as the media needs them. Make sure that there are many interesting things to photograph or film. You may also consider inviting journalists on a science field trip – for example to accompany an ecologist who is busy with a biodiversity survey or marine scientists going out to sea. This is an excellent way for scientists and journalists to spend time together and may result in several stories in the longer term.

"A good working relationship with a positive and enthusiastic media officer makes a huge difference."

Diran Onifade, Nigerian television journalist and President of the African Federation of Science Journalists

Embracing new media

The social media revolution and the exploding growth of mobile phones across Africa represent new opportunities to communicate.

While the mobile market seems to be reaching saturation levels in developed countries, mobile growth remains strong in the developing world. In Africa, mobile penetration rates reached an estimated 41% by the end of 2010, with significant potential for growth. (Source: International Telecommunication Union). Although internet user penetration in Africa lags behind the world average at only 11.5%, close to 119 million Africans are using the internet, and more than 22 million are subscribed to Facebook (Source: www.internetworldstats.com).

Social media offer the opportunity to reach massive new audiences, build networks, share resources, engage in debate and find out what people are saying about science. They can be used to support your media releases or events. Alternatively, you can view them as a media channel in their own right. There is a growing number of influential science bloggers who can help you get your stories out. However, be aware that your social media presence may be time consuming to maintain. Also, engaging with social media involves a loss of control over where the conversation leads or what is said. Will your senior management be happy with this?

There are many different forms of social media serving different roles such as:

- Sharing resources: YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, Audioboo.
- Establishing your expertise in a certain field, raising awareness; Blogspot, WordPress, Twitter.
- Networking: Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Google Plus and Orkut.

“Despite challenges, online, mobile and social media are thriving in Africa. There are already millions of users in Africa – and the numbers are growing fast, …”

Oumy Ndiaye, head of communication services at CTA in the Netherlands

Preparing your scientists

When you are preparing your scientists for media work, here are some issues to consider:

Who is the right person for the job? Journalists often ask for the most senior person in the research group or the head of department, but they are not necessarily the best for the job. Do you need someone who can provide a good overview, or the person who knows the most about a specific area? Are they good communicators? Which languages do they speak?

Does the scientist know what to expect? Make sure they understand how quickly they have to respond to the journalist. If they are to be interviewed, try and give them as much information as you can: How long will it be? Do they need to go to a studio? What angle will the interviewer be taking? Will anyone else be interviewed? Will it be live or pre-recorded? You will often be dealing with a scientist who is new to the media.

Managing expectations: Not all stories you work with will be of high news value. Be honest with your scientists about what to expect, particularly if it will take up a lot of their time for little return. Scientists should also be aware that a news story can be cut at the last minute if a bigger story comes along. Pre-recorded interviews are almost always edited to less than a minute. Interviews with print reporters often result in short quotes appearing in an article.

Media training: If an opportunity for media work arises for a scientist who lacks media experience, you can help them to prepare by making sure they think carefully about their key messages (and write them down) before the interview. Conduct a mock radio and/or TV interview with the scientist if there is time. Make sure they know that you don't have to answer a journalist's questions directly, but that you can use the questions as a platform to communicate the key messages that you have prepared. Tailor-made media training is especially valuable to young scientists who are likely to have to work with journalists throughout their career, as well as those who work in controversial or topical research fields.

"Often, as media officers, we're so busy promoting other people's work that we forget to promote our own work. Tell the academics when you've done well, send them the clippings and interview transcripts. Briefly outline the process involved"

Ruth Francis, head of press, Nature Publishing Group, UK

Managing collaborative stories

Science stories often involve collaborations between multiple institutions, supported by more than one funding body. When you consider a press release on such a collaborative project, contact the communication/media officers of the partner organisations and negotiate with them about who will release the story, who should be quoted, who needs to approve the content, etc. It is usually very important for researchers to keep all their collaborators and funders happy. Once you have an effective working relationship established with these partner organisations, it should be possible to get their support for future collaborative media work and to avoid duplication of effort or – even worse – contradictory media messages.

Working with agencies and freelancers

Outsourcing to agencies or freelancers can be an effective way of adding extra support to your press office in busy periods or if you are under-resourced. However, before you hire external support, it is important to consider whether this is a cost-effective way to achieve your aims. Choose the right people to work with by considering the following:

- Look for agencies with experience of working the science arena. Word of mouth recommendation is always best.
- Ensure your ground rules and procedures are clear from the outset and that you have set realistic targets. Always ensure the press office has final sign-off on press releases and agree on the process and timing of distribution beforehand.
- Meet often and routinely discuss matters of relevance to both parties, but be careful not to micro-manage them. It will be important that the agency is able to build good relationships with your academics, but being an external organisation can present difficulties. Encourage them to get on campus regularly and meet academics in order to build up trust. Academics wary of working with the media can be even more wary of working with external agencies. Make sure a non-disclosure agreement is in place to allay any fears of intellectual property leaks.

“Scientists use too much jargon when you ask them for a quote. I’ll rather talk to them first and then I make up all the quotes in the press releases that I write. I then ask the scientists to approve the suggested wording.”

Mike Shanahan, media officer at the International Institute for Environment and Development

CASE STUDY 1

Do the right thing – Science communication in Africa

Justa Wawira, head of external relations, KEMRI-Wellcome Trust Research Programme, Kenya

The KEMRI-Wellcome Trust Research Programme has the largest MSM (men who have sex with men) cohort under study in Africa. Recently, researchers from our institute, the KEMRI-Wellcome Trust Research Programme, published a paper showing that the HIV circulating within the MSM community was the same virus circulating among the heterosexual community.

Homosexuality is illegal in Kenya and some people in the local community hold anti-gay views. HIV is prevalent among the MSM community and though the topic of homosexuality has received a lot of media coverage in Kenya, most of it has been negative opinion pieces focusing on how 'un-African' it is. This hinders public understanding of how MSM fits into the overall picture of HIV/AIDS in Kenya.

Any mention of MSM may be met with immediate violence. A few weeks before the paper was published, one of our research clinics was attacked. Our researchers were reluctant to publicise their findings for fear of reprisals. Yet this information was clearly important for policymakers and for the public, particularly in such times of fear and misunderstanding.

I had to convince the researchers that communicating the results of the study was the right thing to do, even though I could not guarantee that the community would not react violently. Our research clinic was already in the media spotlight following the attack and planned demonstrations protesting an alleged gay marriage that were to take place in Mtwapa, where the clinic is based. Media reports portrayed the clinic as a place where gays could party. In actual fact the 'parties' were group support meetings organized by the researchers as part of the HIV/AIDS counselling process. Misunderstanding about the clinic's purpose spread throughout the community and we needed to set the record straight.

I began by priming seven senior reporters and four key editors from various media on the contents of the paper. This piqued their interest and they pressed their editors to run the story. We organised a dissemination workshop for the paper in association with Internews, an organisation that works with the local news media to develop better health journalism.

Internews also wanted to help journalists to report more clearly and accurately on this topic. They joined forces with us and offered a training session for science journalists, editors and bureau chiefs linked to our workshop. The results were instant. Our paper hit the headlines that same evening and the next day. The fact that the science was not buried at the end of the story but the primary focus was really encouraging for our researchers.

Such positive experiences are helping our scientists change their attitude and appreciate that, when it comes to media coverage, if you are not out there someone else is and they could easily be giving the wrong impression or worse, completely misleading information. The idea of publicising research results is still taking shape in Africa and we at the KEMRI-Wellcome Trust Research Programme are taking a lead role by encouraging our researchers and scientists to share the results of their work.

I hope our experience helps convince other scientists around the world of the importance and benefits of communicating their research, no matter how difficult the situation might look.

CASE STUDY 2

Personalising a press release

Joseph Warungu is a Kenyan radio journalist and educator who has returned to Kenya after working at BBC (Focus on Africa) in the UK for several years.

Last year – leading up to World Aids Day – I had fantastic help in covering it from a very clued-up media officer working for *Médecins Sans Frontières*. This person knew that World Aids Day was coming up and knew that the BBC would be looking for angles and ways to cover it. So the media officer came up with a new way to cover this.

Rather than just sending out another press release, he gave us access to a woman living in a rural area. This woman was born with HIV and is now 23 years old. She had a compelling human story of what she has gone through. We sent our Nairobi reporter to interview her and she just completely humanised the whole story about stigma and gave us a very refreshing angle. That interviewed was played and re-played and downloaded by a lot of people.

That is what humanising and personalising a press release is all about. Take an issue, but then give us access into it through an example. Don't bombard me with facts. I'd much rather tell a story through people's experiences.

Be creative about how you present the story. Give me opportunities to meet people and record nice sound, and get great visuals if television is involved. If you send me a dry press release about another vaccine that is being released, I'll ask you "so what?" And you better be ready with a creative answer.

CASE STUDY 3

When the headline gets it wrong

Jonathan Absalom Odhong', communication assistant, African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), Kenya

In my experience the relationships between press officers and science journalists are often uneasy. This is because, in most cases, a press officer working in a science institute would pitch a story about research, but more often than not, science journalists publish a story on the topic quite out of context.

Recently, one of our researchers published a paper comparing the transition into first sexual encounters amongst teens living in two informal settlements in Nairobi with teens living in middle and upper class residential areas. I organised for the journalist to interview the researcher and get the details of the study first-hand. Our work with the journalist resulted in a story that was quite balanced, with the researcher's quotes and recommendations included. Sadly the paper's sub-editor wrote the screaming headline "Kenyan slum teens relish sex"! This was definitely sending out the wrong message about the findings of the study which, simply put, just showed that teens growing up in Nairobi slums were likely to have their first sexual experience earlier than their counter parts living in middle to upper class residential areas. The story had been sensationalised and, of course, the researcher wasn't happy about this. This therefore makes it very difficult for the researcher to be willing to share their work with the press in future.

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