Editorial

The Rewards and Challenges of Writing for a Mass Media Audience

Each of us augments our work as health researchers with a significant amount of writing for lay audiences in popular media, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, healthinsurance.org, *Slate*, *Vox*, and other publications.

We are frequently asked by colleagues why we take time from our “real jobs” to do such writing, and how we weigh the accompanying rewards and challenges. In this commentary, we address these questions.

THE REWARDS

Impact provides one reason to write for popular media. Mass media writing can broaden the audience for good, health policy–relevant research that might otherwise be known only to academic specialists. One can also bring rigorous research quickly to bear on current political and policy arguments. For example, one of us wrote an article about an innovative model for managing alcohol-involved offenders that became among the most highly read at *The Wall Street Journal*, exposing a large number of policy makers (particularly more conservative-leaning ones) to the program (Humphreys 2015). Another of us presented epidemiological evidence in *The Washington Post* to reinforce policy arguments against population drug testing of public benefit recipients (Pollack 2013). And one of us brought considerable attention to the suppression of Medicare and Medicaid claims pertaining to substance use disorder through *New York Times* pieces and posts on his own blog (Frakt and Bagley 2015).

Even the most-respected medical journals attract only a fraction of the eyeballs of major media outlets. It is not just the volume of readers, either; it is

also the composition of the audience. Policy makers, and their staffs in Congress, state legislatures, federal and local agencies, the White House, and governors' offices, consume lay media—particularly high-quality content from sources they find trustworthy. Weiss (1987) found that Members of Congress have about 11 minutes a day to read, and that this tends to be devoted to writings that summarize complex topics—for example, staff memos or newspaper headlines—rather than primary sources like scientific journal articles. We have all received far more inquiries from these types of readers about our popular writing than about our journal publications. Research is obviously important, but it is often popular writing that makes it influential. Policy-relevant research that receives no attention from policy makers usually has little impact.

Though we write our journalistic pieces differently from our peer-reviewed journal publications, popular writing can be just as rigorous. It is, in our experience with nationally known outlets, no lower in quality, and subject to no-less-rigorous editorial review and substantive accountability. Indeed, an error or oversimplification in a major newspaper is just as likely, if not more so, to be noticed and challenged as one in an academic journal.

Writing for lay audiences requires scholars to present the main point with accessibility and clarity. These are valuable skills to improve academic writing—a medium in which the main points are sometimes cryptically conveyed and laden with jargon. Whereas journal editors sometimes accept rigorous studies of trivial topics, media editors generally think that something that is not worth doing is not worth doing well. Journal editors quite properly expend tremendous effort critiquing methodology, but they might take a lesson from media editors by also asking the “So what?” question more consistently. Writing for mass media forces academics to ask this question of everything they write and to answer it clearly for their readers. Journal editors might also place greater emphasis on improving the clarity and economy of academic writing. Academics who impose this discipline on themselves make their work much more accessible. Our experience has been that once this skill is mastered in mass media writing, it becomes easier to communicate clearly in academic writing.

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Another benefit of popular writing is the opportunity to expand one's enjoyable role as a teacher. Popular media provide another venue beyond the classroom in which to engage in that noble activity. Popular writing forces us to determine how to explain complex ideas in an accessible way, which pays dividends in other realms.

Writing for lay audiences deepens our own understanding of complex topics. We enjoy the challenge of expressing sophisticated research in accessible terms. This challenge often reveals or fills gaps in our own understanding of important work. The desire to write about an area in which we initially have only surface understanding is often a useful spur to learn more about it, expanding our horizons. Moreover, selecting topics that resonate with readers and inform policy makers forces us to assess what's important. Through writing for lay audiences, one of us has developed a serious interest in nutrition science for instance, for example (Carroll 2015), further popularizing sound work in this discipline in a book for a lay readership (Carroll 2017). Our journalism sometimes connects with our own students in surprising ways, for example, by putting a human face on complicated disability policy matters (Pollack and Pollack 2006).

Writing original pieces for lay audiences is just one way academics can place ideas in mainstream media. They can also serve as sources for journalists. These two roles reinforce each other because journalists often reach out to academics who, like them, write for the mass media. It is worth the few minutes to talk to them about one's pieces, one's own work, as well as that of others in one's field, as a means of amplifying worthwhile messages and work. The skills and perspective one develops in one's own journalism are often helpful in these professional interactions.

It is also worth talking to journalists even if one does not write for a lay audience. However, by doing so, one is responding to the interests of journalists and not being proactive in promoting the work one thinks is important. One also runs the risk of being misquoted or being associated with a conclusion, or perspective one does not support. The only guaranteed way to express one's own voice is to author one's own pieces.

Popular writing can be professionally valuable, too. Most institutions are fond of the attention it brings. Indeed, they often promote pieces written by their faculty. This elevates one's profile and facilitates connections that can lead to collaborations.

How does popular writing affect the likelihood of academic promotion? We do not think it should be viewed as a substitute for scholarly publications. However, academics should get additional credit toward promotion for high-

quality dissemination to lay audiences. One approach to doing so is to view such dissemination as national service or teaching, or a hybrid of the two. Acceptance of columns in major media outlets reflects recognition as a national expert and as a skilled translator of important research. These qualities are already promotion criteria at many institutions at both the tenured associate and full professor level, so it should not be a big leap to incorporate high-quality dissemination to lay audiences accordingly.

THE CHALLENGES

Writing for large media organizations brings its own challenges. The inverted pyramid style of typical media writing—leading with main takeaways and filling in details and background later—is the opposite of journal article style. It can feel awkward, even wrong and undisciplined, to give away the main results before reviewing the literature, justifying key studies' methods, and the like. The expected brevity and aversion to scientific jargon can lead you to feel that you are omitting important caveats and details. Some of us find our column styles spill over into academic articles. Some academic readers welcome this change. It invites a few raised eyebrows from others, who expect a more academic tone.

News organizations also move at a much faster pace than academic journals. You are much more likely to get scooped while preparing for a media outlet than a journal. On the other hand, it is more likely that multiple outlets will take similar work (including one's own blog), so nothing need go to waste.

With exposure can come brutality in the form of hate tweets and irate emails. Expect more of them if you stick your neck out. Some of us find this to be a minimal irritant and easily ignored. For others, it could be significant, especially considering the tendency for women and minorities in the public eye to attract Internet trolls. Additionally, exposure risks irritating colleagues, by visibly staking out positions they might not favor or by (no doubt inadvertently) overlooking their work.

Another challenge is deciding where to publish. Just as it matters where one publishes academic papers, it is also important to consider where to place pieces for a lay audience. We advocate aiming high and trying to place pieces at outlets that one respects and that is held in high regard by the audiences one seeks to reach.

We live in a polarized time in which many figures across the ideological spectrum denigrate the media or declare unwelcome facts “fake news.” These

realities should not dissuade academics from engaging broader popular audiences. First, the much ballyhooed “backfire effect”—that presenting those who hold inaccurate views with facts causes them to cling even more firmly to those views—has been overstated (Wood and Porter 2018). Facts still matter, and that is all the more reason for scholars to write for the mass media. Indeed, attempts to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act in 2017 were defeated, in large part, with facts about the consequences for the uninsurance rate and premiums, as communicated by the Congressional Budget Office and Joint Committee on Taxation and amplified by journalists and academics.

Additionally, there are many issues that are at least slightly peripheral to the most polarized arenas of ideological conflict. On matters such as Medicare Advantage quality indicators, addiction treatment effectiveness, nutrition, disability policy, and many others, most policy makers are hungry for judicious analysis. They welcome communication of important and intricate matters in intelligible ways and rigorously informed by evidence.

Of course, one must be self-aware about not becoming part of the partisan fray oneself in an injudicious way. All of us have used our journalistic role to speak out about substantive issues on occasion. There is not much point to policy writing if one never does that, but exposure invites labeling. One must enter this process in a thoughtful, strategic way. Depending on how you present research—in service to what arguments and even how conclusions are phrased—you can get pigeonholed as an ideologue or a political advocate. A partisan paper trail could affect future opportunities. One of us is more of an overt political or partisan advocate than the other three writers are. This has brought benefits such as additional opportunities for policy advocacy. Partisan identification has costs, too. Avowed policy advocacy sometimes forecloses professional opportunities to serve on nonpartisan panels and study sections. Everyone must consider the benefits and costs to this stance.

More quotidian professional considerations come into play, particularly for junior researchers. One should never assume mass media writing can—or should—replace the normative routes to professional status. It is an “and,” not an “or.” A pile of op-eds from an academic without a strong scholarly record will come across as too much icing and not enough cake.

Time management is always a challenge. So is personal judiciousness and tone. Popular media outlets (not to mention Twitter) may immediately reward intemperate behavior, uncivil polemics, and oversimplification. One can lose sight of one’s long-term scholarly interests and perspective.

For each of us, the benefits to disseminating policy-relevant research through the lay media completely overwhelm the harms. Years later, we still find it some of the most valuable work that we do. The media and the public are hungry for voices that understand science and research and can place that work in context for broader understanding. We hope that more experts will take up that challenge in the years to come.

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Appendix SA1: Author Matrix.