

The National Academies of
SCIENCES • ENGINEERING • MEDICINE

How to Strengthen News Coverage of Social and Behavioral Science

Roundtable on the Communication and Use of Social and Behavioral Sciences

August 9, 2016

NAS Building, Room 120
2101 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20418

Background and Goal

Over the past two decades, the evolution of communication technology and changes in the incentives of publishers and media organizations has transformed how scientific findings are conveyed to the public. Research findings are now spread with unprecedented speed by traditional media reporters, bloggers, professional organizations and by researchers themselves.

This new media environment offers many opportunities for private businesses, public officials, and others to use social and behavioral science to improve people's quality of life. Individual scholars and science organizations can post important findings quickly. They also can give the public and members of the media information to clarify the meaning and potential usefulness of research, helping to increase the number who may understand and benefit from science.

But the path from social and behavioral scientific findings to public understanding and use is not always smooth. Some scholars may not know how to convey newsworthy content in a way that reporters can use. Some reporters may know too little about a finding to convey it accurately. Moreover, people in both communities may have incentives to sensationalize some scientific findings. Since policy makers, their staffs, and the public often obtain science information from media sources, it is critical for scholars and media reporting about science to recognize the challenges to effective communication.

This seminar seeks to address the following questions: *How can researchers and interested members of the media more accurately convey social and behavioral science research findings?*

Invited speakers include social and behavioral scientists experienced in communicating science, leading journalists and media organizations that use social science in their reporting, and academic experts in uses of media for science communication. Our goal is to build a broader understanding of

- the types of social and behavioral scientific information that are and are not newsworthy
- how to convey scientific information in ways that are accessible to the people who will write about them
- how to construct accounts of research that accurately convey what scientists have discovered.

This seminar is a way for scientists to learn about the incentives, opportunities and pressures facing journalists and news organizations in providing accurate information about science. It provides an opportunity for all participants to learn about how individual researchers, science-based organizations, and people in the media can be more effective in communicating social and behavioral science research to benefit the public.

Seminar Overview

The seminar begins with a panel that describes opportunities and challenges associated with communicating social and behavioral science in a changing and complex communication environment. The second panel will highlight a recent example of social and behavioral science research that received media coverage that varied in its accuracy and will seek lessons for future coverage. During a working lunch, participants will meet in small groups and exchange proposals about how to help people who produce potentially newsworthy social and behavioral science information do so accurately and effectively. Afternoon panels will focus on how people who produce social and behavioral science content for some leading publications obtain social and behavioral science information, and how they use it.

The seminar will culminate with a focus group style discussion of actions that individuals and organizations in the scientific community could take in the short and long term to improve the identification of newsworthy social and behavioral research and how it is reported in the media.

Agenda

8:45 Welcome and Introduction

Arthur Lupia, *University of Michigan* (Roundtable Chair)

Mary Ellen O'Connell, Deputy Executive Director, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (DBASSE), National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine

8:55 Setting the Stage

Moderator: Olivia Morgan, *Common Sense Media* (Roundtable Member)

9:00 Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC), University of Pennsylvania*

Dr. Jamieson will describe steps that APPC has taken to generate accurate coverage social and behavioral science studies

9:10 Brian Lin, *EurekAlert!*

Mr. Lin will use examples of how AAAS has engaged with news coverage of social and behavioral science to illustrate important issues that arise in the coverage of SBS.

9:20 Kellina Craig-Henderson, *Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences Directorate, National Science Foundation*

Dr. Craig-Henderson will describe the agency's goals for communicating social and behavioral science's broader impacts to diverse audiences

9:30 Discussion

10:00-11:45 Case Study: Media Coverage of the Reproducibility Project in Psychology

The Reproducibility Project in Psychology, coordinated by the nonprofit Center for Open Science, published an article in *Science* in August 2015, "Estimating the reproducibility of psychological science," which garnered widespread media attention. The researchers who wrote this article could replicate fewer

than half of the effects of 100 published psychological studies. Media coverage of this story raised a number of important issues about news coverage of social and behavioral science, including:

- What social and behavioral science is newsworthy and ready for reporting?
- What do scientists need to know about news reporting and news organizations in order to engage effectively with news media?
- How can social and behavioral scientists be prepared to communicate with journalists about their work?
- How can journalists “get the science right,” while also entertaining and attracting audiences and working under pressure?

The goal of this panel is to address these and other issues to distill possible lessons for individual social and behavioral scientists, the social and behavioral science organizations that engage with reporters, and those who report science in the media.

Brian Nosek, who leads the Reproducibility Project and the Center for Open Science, will present an overview of the project’s mission and work and offer insights about the news coverage that it has received. Richard Harris of *NPR* and Daniel Engber of *Slate* both have reported on the issue of replicability in science. They will describe their views on what made the Reproducibility Project newsworthy and what they see as the major lessons and challenges for journalists who seek to communicate newsworthy science accurately.

Moderator: Howard Kurtzman, *American Psychological Association* (Roundtable Member)

10:05 Brian Nosek, *Center for Open Science* and the Reproducibility Project: Psychology

10:35 Dan Engber, *Slate*

10:45 Richard Harris, *NPR*

10:55 Discussion

11:45 Determination of working groups and obtaining lunch

12:00-12:55 Working Lunch: Small Group Discussions

Participants form small working groups to start an initial conversation on the two final discussion questions:

- What concrete actions can the individuals and organizations that communicate social and behavioral science take *in the next six months* to improve media reporting of newsworthy social and behavioral science?
- If these organizations had five years to develop training materials or infrastructure that would help scientists better understand what kind of content is newsworthy and how to facilitate accurate reporting?

1:00-2:15 Panel: What Social and Behavioral Science is Newsworthy and How It Is Covered

Moderator: Brian Baird, Former Chair of the U.S. House Subcommittee on Energy and Environment, President, *4Pir2 Communications* (Roundtable Member)

Invited Panelists:

- Thomas Patterson, *Harvard Kennedy School, Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy*, and *journalistsresource.org*

- John Sides, *George Washington University* and *The Washington Post's The Monkey Cage blog*
- Susan Pinker, *Wall Street Journal Columnist*

1:05-1:35 Each participant will give a 5-10 minute opening statement. We have asked the participants to address the following questions

- What kind of information from social and behavioral science is newsworthy?
- How do you think journalists should approach identifying and understanding newsworthy social and behavioral science?
- What resources do you think are most useful for identifying and understanding newsworthy social and behavioral science?
- If you could change one thing about how the social and behavioral sciences convey newsworthy information, and how the science gets covered what would it be?

1:35 Discussion

2:15 Break

2:30-4:00 Panel: How Journalists Use Social and Behavioral Science

Moderator: Camille Gamboa, *Sage Publishing* (Roundtable Member)

Invited Panelists:

- Seth Borenstein, *Associated Press*
- Frank Sesno, *George Washington University*
- Laura Helmuth, *Washington Post*
- Maria Balinska, *The Conversation*

2:30-3:10 Each participant will give a 5-10 minute opening statement. We have asked the participants to address the following questions

- What kind of information from social and behavioral science is newsworthy?
- What attributes of social and behavioral science make it most useful to you?
- When do you most need information from the social and behavioral sciences?
- When you need this information, where do you go to get it?
- When you seek this information, what attributes make it most useful to you?
- If you could change one thing about how social and behavioral scientists convey newsworthy information, and how the science gets covered, what would it be?

3:10 Discussion

Open Discussion: Proposals for Conveying Newsworthy Social and Behavioral Science

4:00-4:45 Moderators: Arthur Lupia and Sheri Roder, *Horizon Media* (Roundtable Member)
Opening remarks: Kathleen Hall Jamieson

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