

Three-day International Science Journalism Forum

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THESE pandemic times are at the very least strange, if not actively mindboggling or downright tragic. The world has lost much, and continues to do so, but like with everything, there are resilient silver linings – mostly with vital functions like education and communication finding less-than-ideal, but optimal, online avenues of continuing Business as *Unusual*.

Science Communication and Journalism find themselves in quite the quandary. COVID-19's global impact has made the public need for scientific education and information more mainstream and pertinent than ever, while also allowing social media and vested interests to promote and parade even more misinformation with motivations somewhere on the spectrum from well-intentioned ignorance to malevolent profiteering.

Simultaneously, the tiny-but-not-insignificant virus has restricted both the reach of science itself – limiting what scientists can realistically attempt or achieve as well as the movement and in-person access to sources, scientists and science that form the backbone of serious reporting, science or otherwise.

In the face of such obstacles, science communicators have had to find other ways of retaining, or even upgrading their workflow, and the Science Journalism Forum held between the 24th and 26th of August, 2020, was one such noteworthy endeavour.

The Science Journalism Forum was a virtual event, brought to fruition with the efforts of Bothina Osama, Middle East & North Africa (MENA) regional coordinator of SciDevNet, and Saad Lotfey, Editor-in-Chief of Popular Science Arabia, and supported by the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing (CASW), National Association of Science Writers (NASW), the Knight Science Journalism program at MIT (KSJ@MIT), and EurekAlert! by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

The Forum hosted 140+ speakers from every inhabitable continent, science and science media associations, research and scientific education institutions, emerging technologies, as well as over 900 active participants from across the world. The attendees were treated to a total of 76 talks, panel discussions and presentations, between 30 and 75 minutes in length—in Spanish (15 sessions), Portuguese (4) and Arabic (20), and the remaining sessions in English, thus ensuring the trans-lingual relevance of science and science communication was itself communicated well to all audiences.

Local issues and achievements pertaining to science communication were also deliberated, with numerous talks and panel discussions centred on nurturing and strengthening areas of the Global South – Latin America, the MENA, the African continent, and South Asia – as well as significant representation from science communicators in the developed world, with speakers chiming in from Europe, Oceania and North America.

It was a great bounty of insights for young or student journalists. Deborah Blum (Program Director, Knight Science Journalism, MIT), in a candid and engaging talk, stressed on the evolution of the profession and tips to keep all practitioners in step with the changes that modern science journalism continues to entail. Olga Dobrovidova (Senior Copywriter, Skoltech), Andrada Fiscutean (Science and technology journalist) and Mićo Tatalović (News Editor, Research Fortnight), expounded upon guidelines to launch a career in science journalism and the fundamentals of navigating every real-life step of the process, from locating potential stories to pitching them to editors. Samir Mahmoud (Deputy Chief Editor, Al Ahram institution) conducted a session on the basics of journalism; Hazem Badr

(Assistant Editor-in-Chief, Al-Akhbar Daily) gave a rundown of the skills needed to prepare and write a scientific press interview; Samya Ayish (Google News Initiative Teaching Fellow in the MENA) spoke about tools and data sources for environmental journalists, and in another talk, shared Google Trends of what people are searching for when they look up science; and Bothina Osama explained how to nurture healthy editor-freelancer relationships.

Several other topics discussed and expounded upon, including: pedagogy and community activities for academics and science communicators to become science ambassadors in their own communities; paradigms of social science communication; boosting science journalism with cross-border reporting across continents; importance of epidemiology concepts for the uninitiated science journalist.

Dr A.P. Jayaraman (Chairman, National Centre for Science Communicators, India) narrated the fascinating case study of the impact of a long history of science communication in the Indian state of Kerala, as well as science literacy and education, on the singular Kerala model of COVID-19 containment. Krishnaswamy VijayRaghavan (Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India) was interviewed by Pallava Bagla (Science Photo Journalist) on the challenges faced in communicating science in India, the world's largest and most culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse democracy. TV Venkateswaran (Scientist, Vigyan Prasar, India) described the effort in improving the visibility of local science in India with 'India Science Wire'.

Other topics discussed included the impediments to reporting on science in conflict zones; constraints faced by scientists in developing nations; communicating to new generations; disinformation and fake news; need for more diversity in the science journalism vocation; gender and race representation in the scientific workforce and improving the visibility of women scientists and science communicators.

The themes of the Forum covered multiple aspects of the science communicator's life, including perhaps even the life cycle of a science journalist – running the gamut from the basics, tools, technologies, case studies and best practices for students

and aspiring journalists, to consultations on challenges and new realities for experienced journalists in a post-truth, mid-COVID, way-past-digital world that is at once more connected and more confounded.

It also encompassed the regional, civilizational and cultural concerns and challenges faced by science communication, science popularization and science education; the efforts, tools, initiatives and projects being spearheaded by science communicators across the globe; funding, financing and business models for science journalism and science communication ventures; encouragement for more collaborations, mentorship and support for Global South stories and journalists, as well as cross-border journalism; and interviews with scientists, science journalists and science communication entrepreneurs.

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The report was published in the January 2021 issue of Science Reporter, CSIR-NISCAIR