The Stories of Science: Iowa City and Beyond

Elise Kerns
University of Iowa
Abstract:

In collaboration with The Daily Iowan, my project highlighted national science news by emphasizing the work of researchers on campus. By focusing on the stories of UI scientists and researchers, my project hoped to humanize science by expressing it in accessible terms and relating current scientific research locally. Through this I hope to have placed more emphasis on process than product, specifically looking at what future implications national science news could have for UI researchers. In total, I wrote three separate articles for publication. Some of my favorite fragments of several of my interviews I conducted during the process can be found on this page, compiled into a single audio file. Of my three articles, two had analytics information that I compiled into infographics scattered throughout this narrative. Ultimately, through my articles, I hope to have made topical science research seem less daunting to those who may feel alienated by science. I believe that science, chiefly, is a human process, and its communication ought to emphasize that.

Goals and Rationale:

While my initial rationale for this project was primarily to communicate science research accurately and broadly to the Iowa City public, I had personal goals for this project as well. Through my articles I wanted to share science news accessibly to all levels of science education, but I also wanted to learn what skills are necessary to become a successful and compelling science communicator. Because of this, I desired a two-fold outcome for my project: increase science literacy and engagement in the Iowa City community, and improve my ability to speak widely and accessibly about science research and news. Initially, my first goals for this project were focused more heavily on emphasizing the role of scientists themselves, using their narratives of the research process to inform the way my readers understood my specific research topic. However, those goals shifted throughout the process, both in response to the expectations of The Daily Iowan and my own personal shifts in focus.

Implementation:

For me, the process of communicating science news locally was long and, unfortunately, occasionally discouraging. Before I could write an article I first had to pitch it to my editors at the DI.
This meant that every Sunday I had to craft three succinct snapshots of what I wanted to write about, who I was hoping to interview, what credible outside sources I had to back the story up, and when I could expect the article to be finished. Because I wrote for the Metro section of the paper, in addition to these criteria I also had to answer two key questions during pitch meetings: “What’s new about it?” and “How is it local?” My editors warned us new reporters early on that pitching would be the most difficult part of our job, but personally I found it to be the easiest. All my inspiration already came from credible sources that described current science news, and all my interview sources were professors and researchers, helping me make sure my focus was local and tailored towards the university. For someone like me who is practiced in drafting a thesis, pitching was familiar territory. It was the step that followed that I found significantly more challenging.

For each article that I wrote for The Daily Iowan I had to speak with three sources. At first, that seemed like an easy task. However, because of the nature of my articles, that task required constant emailing of professors, researchers, and professionals. The overwhelming majority of my emails went unanswered. This often meant that I would go days or weeks in a research stasis where I felt that I wasn’t producing anything meaningful. Eventually, I finally conducted nine total interviews and met with scientists and researchers across various sciences including Physics and Astronomy, Neurology, and Psychology. Although the process of obtaining sources was often difficult, the interview process itself was deeply enriching for me.

Before my interviews I wrote down questions for my sources, but I quickly learned that some of the best quotes that I obtained were from moments entirely off-script. This was fascinating for me. I began asking more hypothetical questions of my sources, and began to look forward to asking “Do you have anything else to add?” because I knew I would get some of the best, most authentic answers of the entire interview. Although I wasn’t able to use most of these moments in my final products for publication, I enjoyed the process very much. I found it inspiring to speak with scientists who are passionate about their work and excited about the prospect of

I was intrigued to find that my second article had more desktop visitors than my first, and I was surprised to find that this was a trackable analytic at all.

I have found myself revisiting these articles to see if I could account for any reason for the shift in gender demographic. I still feel unsure as to the exact cause, but I think the shift is fascinating, regardless.
communicating it more widely. Although those moments can often be more difficult to write about, I liked that I was given a chance to try.

**Impact and Takeaway**

Overall, I know that I reached at least 1174 people online through my articles. Through that, I also know that I had at least a combined 92 interactions and engagements through social media. Although these estimates don’t represent the whole of the impact of all my articles or their reach, I still find the outcome rewarding. Having the opportunity to communicate science to more than 1000 people, in and out of Iowa City, has been an incredibly educational experience.

Selfishly, I feel I’ve accomplished some of my personal goals for this project. My work with The Daily Iowan has improved some of my personal science communication skills and taught me invaluable lessons along the way. I learned, ultimately, that flexibility is key. Flexibility allowed me to shift the direction of my articles per the needs of the DI, but it also allowed me to have more meaningful moments of conversation with scientists in the process.

Although I didn’t get to write exactly what I wanted in my articles, I know that because of this experience my method of science communication moving forward will be more informed and, most importantly, more flexible.