

*Bridging the gap between academia and the media is not a simple task but it is essential if academics are to impact and improve society and inform its citizens. **John Wihbey** looks at how the Internet is bringing academics and journalists closer together and argues that there is still work to be done on both sides.*



The diffusion of deep knowledge to help improve our information ecosystem and, ultimately, society, is a goal shared by those readers of this blog, and by those of us at Journalist's Resource.org although we do approach scholarly communications from a different angle. Just as scholars seek to amplify their voices in public discourse and policy, Journalist's Resource wants to open journalists' eyes to the power of scholarly research.

Knowledge-based Reporting in the Digital Age

Even as the online world more fully democratizes information, the media remain a central conduit for how citizens receive and engage with knowledge. But some dynamics are shifting. Newspapers are declining, opinion journalism is on the rise, and information overabundance has started to become a problem for citizens — as the amount of noise makes it difficult to hear the signal, issues of reliability become even more salient.

There are two aspects to helping improve journalism as it moves into this uncertain future. Both revolve around the concept of “[knowledge-based reporting](#)”, according to [Tom Patterson](#), research director of Journalist's Resource and Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press at the Harvard Kennedy School:

One is to extend the boundaries of knowledge, which is the everyday work of the scientist, the policy specialist, and uncounted public-sector and private-sector bureaucrats... The second way to increase the reliability of news is for journalists to make greater use of accumulated knowledge.... Although knowledge is a component of everyday reporting, it is not its mainstay. Journalists are not trained to think first about how systematic knowledge might inform a news story.

Outside universities, studies remained largely inaccessible to the uninitiated — particularly those on a tight deadline. Elite outlets routinely feature stories that use academic studies and reports, but most scholarship earns at best a modest number of press reports and blog posts and infrequently informs stories directly.

Making Knowledge Accessible

In the Internet age, journalists have significantly improved access to research. Google Scholar, Social Science Research Network (SSRN), the Public Library of Science (PLOS) and other databases put a whole new class of knowledge at the media's fingertips. Despite this access, many useful studies that could shed light on public problems remain untapped as knowledge sources.

[Nick Lemann](#), dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, [notes that](#) while reporters call academics occasionally to “get a quote,” they are not accustomed to engaging with the scholarly literature itself in the name of making these interactions richer. Yet such habits of mind fit squarely with journalism's core mission, he says:

So what journalists are is a connection point between the informed general public and the inaccessible. And the inaccessible can be hidden records of official misdeeds, or it can be what people are doing in the mountains of Afghanistan, or it can be expertise.... We're supposed to make those connections. And knowledge-based journalism is an important part of doing that. So it really does produce journalism that is richer and fuller.

To achieve this vision, several simultaneous steps are required: greater accessibility of research; journalists who are more open to scholarly findings; and scholars who are more willing to explain important work in language that is accessible to the public. These issues cannot be emphasized enough.

Academic vs. Mass Audiences

New Yorker writer and author [Malcolm Gladwell](#), one of America's great popularizers of social science research, [has discussed](#) the different audiences of journalists and academics and the different constraints they impose:

You are limited in a sense that you can only write about things that you can explain for a lay-audience. This is one of the things that academics sometimes fail to grasp about popular writing.... There's almost no occasion when they are writing for their own audience where they can't tackle a topic because of the difficulty explaining it.... Whereas I literally cannot discuss something that my audience cannot understand. I can't do it, I lose them, they're gone ... and then I've failed.

While the online world brings with it certain perils, it also opens up possibilities that did not exist before. [Andy Revkin](#), a longtime *New York Times* science and environment journalist and the author of the "Dot Earth" blog, [has suggested](#) that the iterative nature of blogging can better reflect the true process of scholarly research and inquiry:

One thing that led me on these issues to blogging more and more is that I think it better reflects the nature of these questions — that is, that the "ah-ha!" moments are mostly fictional. And a blog treatment of an issue like climate change or biodiversity in a crowding world is a better fit for that line of inquiry.... So you say, "On this blog, on this issue, you can rely on me as a guide more than a translator. In other words, we're on a journey.

The Research-Communications Future

At the end of the day, a "deeper" mass media will constitute only a modest improvement for society unless citizens are trained early on to identify and process deeper knowledge themselves. Alison Head, of the University of Washington's [Project Information Literacy](#) and Harvard's Berkman Center, has been studying the younger generation's online information-seeking habits, and she [has found](#) that there are many problem areas to consider:

Today's students have tremendous difficulty with the research process, whether they are trying to solve information problems for courses or in their everyday lives.... When we [surveyed more 8,300 students at 25 U.S. institutions](#) in 2010, more than 80% of respondents reported they had the most difficulty getting started on course-related research assignments. Another 66% could not define a research topic or narrow it.

Despite these challenges, the rise of the Internet brings with it the possibility of journalists helping to magnify significantly the power of academic scholarship. Just one example is the wealth of elections research, which can be a boon to political journalism. As George Washington University political scientist and academic blogger John Sides [recently told Journalist's Resource](#),

The value of political science — although of course we can't do this consistently, every single

day — is that we can take what’s happening in the campaign and put it in context of the research that’s been done, and try to understand what’s really important and what’s not important here.

Last year, Sides co-authored a paper with Dartmouth College professor Brendan Nyhan titled “[How Political Science Can Help Journalism \(And Still Let Journalists Be Journalists\)](#)” (PDF). The paper is a call to link arms — or at least understand one another more deeply — that we think both parties can agree would be beneficial.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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