Latham Science Communication Project

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The Research Recap

Nina VanDerZanden
University of Iowa

Project Narrative

It's evident that in our current social climate, objective, scientific fact has been cast as a scheming political force for much of the public. I believe that a contributing factor to this issue is the distance between the layman and the ambiguous "them" that generates and disperses scientific/medical/technological information. It is much easier to discount or distrust a vague voice telling one that their intuition is wrong, compared to seeing clear evidence from a known source. Too often, this known source is personal or anecdotal experience. By using an easily consumable media format, a podcast that presents as a voice literally speaking into the individual's ear, this project aims to make relaxed discussion of peer reviewed science a part of the personal experience that we rely on to inform our worldview. The Research Recap is aimed at young adults, using non-STEM majors at the University of Iowa as an experimental population.
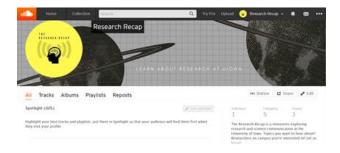

The steps of creating this podcast was an iterative learning process. The prepare for each interview, weeks of communication searching for participants and establishing schedules was required. Because each next stage depended so wholly on those before, this became a major hurdle in terms of progressing the project. Because there were not yet any episodes published, it was challenge to explain precisely what the vision of the project was. Over the continued correspondence, the concept of the project solidified and became easier to summarize. Each interview, the preparation process improved. Initially, each interviewee was sent a specific list of questions a week in advance. This did ensure they were prepared, however, the interview itself came off as stiff and rehearsed, and though informational, was not ideal. After meeting with Charity Nebbe of Iowa Public Radio, the project took a new approach to preparation. The preparation was to present interviewee with a bulleted list of talking points in advance, and to form the questions in response to previous responses. This provided more direction to the interview, seeking out interesting points as they came up. The episodes open with a brief summary that frames the topic or interview content. The research I did to prepare for the interview in terms of learning about the field was reiterated here for listeners. As I struggled to gather interviews, I decided to include episodes of myself alone speaking about the importance of understanding common science misconceptions, such as the definition of error. I felt that the interviews with researchers met my goal of making research more personable and less mysterious, but failed to focus in on common hurdles to decoding scientific language. These "minisodes" serve to supplement the principle storyline of the podcast series.

The final project was three episodes hosted on Soundcloud, each approximately fifteen minutes in length. In the first week since posting, the page had nearly fifty listens. I expect the audience to continue to grow, as one of my interviewees has intention to post his interview on the Optical Science and Technology Center website. Additionally, the episodes will soon be circulating on KRUI's "The Lab" with other student podcasts. The project is linked to on the Stem-o-sphere site as well.

Because of the online nature of this project, the impact is as of yet unclear, but I will continue to monitor listener and follower count going forward. Over the next summer and two semesters I will continue to make episodes, both interviews and descriptive minisodes, for the Research Recap. For each half hour of recorded interview, a minimum three hours of research and editing are required. This is sustainable as a student project as it's a similar time commitment as a class. The largest difficulty of this project is gathering interviews, but having a published basis that potential interviewees can be referred to in addition to a longer window to plan interview times that doesn't overlap with grant application times will make this process much more streamlined. Upon graduation, I would ideally like to pass the project on to another Latham fellow who could continue to build on and improve the project.

From this experience, my confidence as an interviewer and leader in a conversation increased by a wide margin. Each interaction I had I improved my skills, and see this pattern continuing into the future of the project. What held this project back was persistently emailing prospective interviews. I was pitching them a project that didn't yet exist, to be interviewed by myself, who is by no means a professional interviewer. Now, on the other side, I see this as personal hesitation founded more in anxiety than reality, and with a professional demeanor and open conversation it's possible to get many more quality interviews. Despite this, I found so much satisfaction working on a self-driven, self-organized project. I was able to combine a media that I love with the joy I find in talking about science and research to others, and I believe this enthusiasm shows through in the quality of the final project.