

ABSTRACT

This is a call to science communicators and science journalists to feature social science research and researchers in their reporting, with an emphasis on anthropology and its potential to increase public empathy, improve the quality of public discourse, and contribute to contextual and narrative news trends. Keywords: social science communication; anthropology; narrative news; empathy.

Anthropology, Empathy, and the Need for More *Social* Science Communication

The National Science Foundation's Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences Directorate states that "citizens need social and behavioral science insights if they are to understand domestic and international policy choices, be effective consumers of public information, and make personal and professional decisions based on what is known about human interactions and organizations" (Levine et al. 2004, 81). Although social sciences such as anthropology and sociology are STEM sciences, their methods have been utilized far more for *assessment* of STEM communication; they have rarely been the subject matter of science reporting, STEM communication research, or public understanding of STEM.

This commentary is a call to feature *social* science—specifically anthropology—in STEM communication and science journalism. We advocate for and build our argument around the contributions of anthropology because this is our area of expertise; this argument is also relevant to other social science fields that utilize qualitative methods and contribute to understanding human experience and diversity. In a National Science Foundation (NSF) funded report about education and training in the social sciences, there was a request that NSF "commit itself to public literacy in the social sciences" (Levine et al. 2004, 3). We are broadening this call to science communicators and science journalists: commit to increasing public literacy in social sciences, feature more *social* sciences in your reporting; go beyond political science, economics, and psychology, which are the more recognized and

represented social sciences in news and public communication (Cassidy 2014). Specifically, we invite you to consider the merits and value of featuring anthropological research.

There is a growing empathy deficit in America (AAM 2017) and our public discourse is increasingly becoming polarized (Bolsen and Shapiro 2018; Pew Research Center 2014). The social sciences provide a potential antidote (Small 2019). Anthropological research in particular is aimed at increasing empathy and understanding the human experience from its origins to today, bringing to light people's lived experiences in complex and detailed ways. Since the discipline's beginnings, anthropologists have often shared their research through narrative-driven storytelling, but academic publications have limited reach and anthropology research is underrepresented in mass media (Eriksen 2006). We want to invite science communicators and science journalists to take a closer look at this field—and feature its contributions more prominently.

Empathy is considered the “modus operandi” of anthropology (Mohr et al. 2019) and can be understood as “a first-person-like, experiential understanding of another person's perspective,” often in a cross-cultural context (Hollan 2008; cf. Watson 1999, 1). Or, as Small (2019) puts it, empathy means understanding another person's “perspective as they understand and represent it to themselves.” Empathy also involves complex-thinking—navigating nuance and often trading simplistic binaries for dynamic continuums (Fisher 2017; Teixeira de Melo 2020; Wendland et al. 2015).

Topics like immigration at the US-Mexico border have provided a glimpse into the potential of communicating anthropology to a broader audience (cf. De León 2016). In 2018, the popular show Radiolab produced a three-part series about the US-Mexico border featuring the research of anthropologist Dr. Jason De León. It was a timely and important show, and it was an excellent example of relevant and engaging public communication of social science research. It was also pure happenstance. Radiolab's director of research explains,

I sat next to a pleasant stranger on a bus from New York to DC. Her name was Lynn Morgan. She's an anthropologist. I told her that I found the field fascinating, and asked her to tell me about the youngest and most interesting folks working in the field today. She told me about a book, *The Land of Open Graves* by Jason De León. That conversation was the seed for a story that took me and the rest of the Radiolab team a full year to report and produce, and ultimately became Radiolab's *Border Trilogy*. (Nasser 2018)

We need a more systematic and sustained process for promoting powerful stories from anthropology research through informal science media so that these kinds of stories are reported on due to more than just a chance encounter.

When social science research *is* reported, it is often by generalists, not science reporters and, therefore, it is not seen as meriting “journalistic specialization.” Furthermore, social scientists are more often commentators rather than principal sources for a story (Cassidy 2008, 228; 2014). Research also shows that social sciences that employ qualitative methods are less likely to be “taken seriously by journalists” than more quantitative fields like psychology and economics (Cassidy 2014, 189; cf. Small 2019). There is also the pace of journalism today. Bradley Patterson (2013, 106), Harvard's Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press, explains that “when [journalists] have to file quickly, they turn to what they already know—increasing their knowledge is the best way to ensure accurate and better reporting.” He also notes that “reliable information on the issues of the day is an increasingly scarce commodity” (Patterson 2013, 143). He advocates that knowledge is another tool—alongside interviewing and observation—that should be in the journalist's toolkit (Patterson 2013, 104). We invite science communicators and journalists to seek out anthropologists in their reporting. And we have work to do, also—such as responding to journalists' calls for social scientists to communicate stories rather than topics or issues (Baron 2010, 41).

Featuring anthropology research, particularly cultural anthropology and ethnographic narratives that are often based on years of research in one place or with one community, can specifically contribute to the rise of “contextual” and “narrative” news. These forms of reporting emphasize providing a sense of “being there,” increasing empathy (Oliver et al. 2012; Wihbey 2012), and focusing on narrative and storytelling in journalism (Hermann 2016; LeMasurier 2015; Stray 2013). According to the *Journalist’s Resource* at Harvard, “contextual journalism has emerged as a powerful and prevalent companion to conventional reporting. Its impact on how people understand their world has yet to be explored” (Long 2013; see also Stray 2013). In his book *Engaging Anthropology*, Eriksen (2006) argues that anthropologists should play a leading role in shaping public understanding of human existence by encouraging people to examine other’s beliefs as well as their own. Furthermore, he posits that non-academics are more than capable of understanding complexity and nuance when it comes to their fellow humans, provided that they are conveyed in a coherent and engaging manner. Research in psychology, public health communication, and narrative suggests that narrative strategies, particularly those that focus convincingly on individuals, have the potential to increase empathy across cultural divides (Burgess et al. 2007; Dahlstrom 2014).

Beyond a need for increasing social science communication to the public, there is also a need for conducting research about it. It is remarkable that a recent study found social science to be the second category of STEM fields that Millennials (ages 23-38) are most interested in after technology (KQED 2018, 65), but little research in STEM communication has focused on social science fields (Cassidy 2014). Research shows that social sciences are not included in what comes to mind when the public thinks of scientific research (American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2018, 3). And while there has been rigorous research on STEM communication, it mainly focuses on biological and physical sciences and neglects the social sciences (Cassidy 2008, 2014; Schäfer 2012).

More research about the public communication, and public understandings, of social science is needed. Very little is understood about what Americans know about social science, or what they learn from anthropological research in the news. This is due in large part because social sciences are not part of national polls such as Pew Research Center's polls that ask what Americans know about science and where they get their science news (Funk et al. 2017; Kennedy and Hefferon 2019). In the National Science Board's annual review, social science is included in the higher education and labor reviews, but it is absent from Chapter 7, which looks at public attitudes and understandings of science (National Science Board 2018). In addition, surveys that address public knowledge of STEM fields use indicators that do not include the social sciences. The questions the US National Science Foundation uses to measure the public's level of factual knowledge about science "remain the core of the best available data on trends in adult Americans' knowledge of science" (National Science Board 2018), but the "Survey of Public Attitudes Toward and Understanding of Science and Technology undertaken by NSF currently asks no specific questions that would probe awareness of the scientific study of human and social dynamics" (Levine et al. 2004, 81fn52).

Most of what people know about science is through "non-school" experiences over the course of their lives (Falk and Dierking 2010, 486). Studies have shown that in America the success of adults outperforming other nations in science literacy (as opposed to comparisons with older children) comes from access to digital magazines, public television, museums, and other self-directed learning environments. These opportunities matter, and it is important diversify them and the *kinds* of science they highlight. In addition, by focusing on social science STEM fields, *who* is highlighted also changes—increasing public visibility of more women and minority scientists, who are more likely to receive doctorates in social sciences (except for economics) (National Science Board 2018, 2:43).

"Tolerance, intercultural dialogue, and respect for diversity are more essential than ever in a world where peoples are becoming more and more closely interconnected," said Kofi Annan, the former

Secretary-General of the United Nations (as quoted in CDC 2014, 22). There are many ways to communicate science and through different media; “at their best, they all bring science to the attention of the general public. This hopefully contributes to raising the information level of public discourse. That is why science communication is so popular—and why university-based science communication teaching and research programmes are flourishing around the world” (Guenther et al. 2016). We are advocating that social science STEM fields be included in this trend.

The goals of inviting journalists and science communicators to feature anthropological research include to support a more informed public, to increase public (social) science literacy, and to improve the quality of public discourse. Anthropologists have often been working in a region, or community, for years and can offer a broader context and insight to frame what is being reported on in the moment. This could provide more nuanced understandings of issues that affect our society, giving greater context and insider perspectives on stories related to, for example, refugee crises, increasing educational outcomes, or more efficient energy systems—increasing public “cultural competence” (CDC 2014, 22) to enable members of society to understand, work, and communicate more effectively. In short, increasing empathy increases prosocial behavior, critical thinking, and mutual understanding—all of which benefit society’s well-being (Barton and McCully 2012; Schultz 2000; Yeager and Foster 2001).

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J. Shannon (2021) *Science Communication* journal

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