



Platform for critical, credible science news and views

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THROUGHOUT the world, the number of specialist science writers is dwindling. At the same time, calls are mounting for scientists to make their work more publicly visible and accessible. People are increasingly going online to search for science-related content, but find it difficult to distinguish between reliable, science-based information and dubious, pseudo-scientific claims.

These are just some of the reasons why a credible, digital platform for science news and views, such as the *The Conversation - Africa* edition, is positioned to help bridge the gap between science and society. As an open-access source of reliable science news and expert opinion, it has emerged as a trusted content provider. This is particularly important in the African context, where independent sources of science news are rare.

The Conversation is published under a Creative Commons licence. As such, it provides a free source of science news and views for mass media outlets. This

means that small newspapers, radio and TV stations and online news sites are able to republish information, with due credit to the source. Via its searchable expert database, *The Conversation* makes it possible for journalists to find trusted experts who can be contacted for interviews or comment.

Universities, science councils and research funders generally support efforts to communicate science more effectively with public and policy audiences, and are therefore among the core endorsers. For universities, the platform provides an independent showcase for the achievements of their research champions and voices of thought leaders. It helps to demonstrate that the work and views of their research staff are meaningful, relevant and responsive to real issues in society.

The people who pay for most research in a country like South Africa – that is, the citizen and taxpayer – have a right to access new knowledge and expertise in order to help them make better (evidence-based) decisions. The content and

experts featured can be a key starting point for constructive dialogue between scientists and people outside science.

Despite growing demands on scientists to connect with public audiences, this kind of engagement is unfamiliar territory for most. Fearing a negative impact on their reputations, many shy away from interactions with visibility in public life. That is why having a safe route for escaping from the proverbial ivory tower is important.

The Conversation is funded and endorsed by research organisations, including leading universities. It is used by thousands of leading scientists across the world as a platform for sharing their work. This institutional approval and peer support signal to academics that the platform is recognised as a legitimate and valued link between science and society.

Scientists fear being misquoted or misunderstood when interviewed by

journalists. The editorial process at *The Conversation* is designed to eliminate these fears by giving the contributing scientist(s) control over the final version of a story before it is published.

To write for *The Conversation*, researchers must be actively involved in research (PhD level or higher) and must be employed at a university or government scientific research institution. This editorial policy goes some way towards ensuring that content comes from trustworthy experts. In a further effort to boost transparency and trust, authors have to declare relevant sources of research funding or other interests.

When scientists write, they get behind-the-scenes help from an experienced editor. While scientists have expert knowledge, they often lack the ability to communicate it effectively to people outside their research field. Journalists, on the other hand, are not experts in any

specific field of science, but they have the skills that are needed to tell a good story or craft a compelling argument based on new scientific evidence. By bringing scientists and journalists together, *The Conversation* creates meaningful partnerships that deliver top-quality science content written in a style suitable for a general audience.

From the perspective of scientists, contributing to an online platform provides a free, easy-to-use way to become more visible to the mass media and other interest groups. Once an article is published, authors are able to track their impact via a user-friendly online dashboard, showing the number of downloads, re-use by other media outlets and social media uptake. It is also possible to respond to questions and comments.

In addition to the tangible benefits and visible impact – such as interest from potential partners, funders and prospective students – researchers might also experience personal rewards when they engage with non-experts. Many scientists experience a sense of satisfaction

and fulfilment from giving something back to society. Scientists delight in seeing that people are interested in what they do and welcome it when people want to know more. Perhaps one of the most unexpected rewards is when questions from “ordinary” people provide fresh perspectives and lead to new ideas for future research.

Clearly, writing for a general, non-specialist audience demands special skills. In addition to a deep insight into their own field and the ability to clarify complex ideas, they must be willing to tell (factual) stories that connect with people on an emotional level and also be ready to (really) listen to feedback. Seen from this perspective, writing for *The Conversation* provides a way for scientists to become better communicators – which ultimately is the pathway to ensuring broader social and policy impact for their research. – *The Conversation*

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