# INTRO TO SCIENCE WRITING

Week 1 – Introduction; What is Science Journalism

7/11/2020

What is the purpose of science journalism?

- Connects a public that largely doesn't understand science to a world that's based on it

- Doesn't tell an audience what to believe but rather helps them understand what is going on and how it affects them

- Shows that science matters and it is in the audience's self-interest to learn about it

Is the public even interested in science?
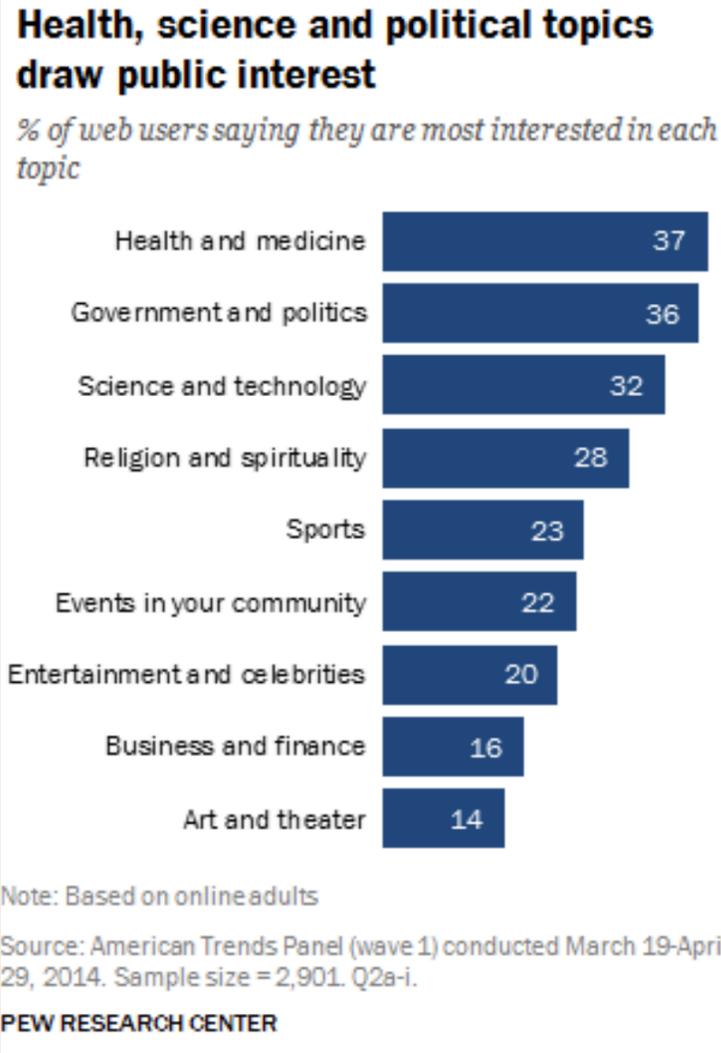
How is science journalism different from science technical writing?

- Science
  - *Slow process that often reverses itself*
  - *Accumulation of facts taken over long periods of time*
  - *Every study is part of a larger whole*
  - *Research conducted by highly trained professionals*

- Science journalism
  - *Looks for dramatic change and big leaps (mostly in people, not zebrafish or mice)*
  - *Each story is a snapshot in time*
    - Good journalism provides some context, but often focuses on one sliver of a field
  - *Journalists aren't usually trained experts in the fields they cover*
  - *Journalists focus on the potential for the work - the bigger picture much more than the details*

It's all about perspective...

- A news story may be the culmination of years/decades of a scientist's life but only a day/week of a journalist's life

- Journalism can help a scientist's career or really mess it up for a few weeks

- Journalism should have the same public service mission as science but in different ways

What makes a great basis for science journalism?

■ Based on legitimate science and accurate studies

■ Makes an emotional connection – hooks and draws you in

■ Written or presented in a creative/compelling way

■ Makes you think

■ Anything else?

What makes a great science journalist?

- Flexibility – must adapt to new rules/models

- Willingness to learn new media skills
    - *Yesterday was video and Twitter. Today is newsletter writing and podcasting. Tomorrow?*

- Don't get stuck on one thing – science journalists are not just writers, they are also multimedia journalists

- Look out for yourself - you can't trust any particular group or organization to have your best interest at heart
    - *Need to develop a unique "brand" as a journalist*

How you can practice

■ Read other journalists.

– *Examples of good journalism – what did they do correctly?*

– *Examples of not-so good journalism – what did they not do correctly?*

■ Try to see the world and the events around you as a journalist would

Things to look for in good science journalism pieces

■ Does it tell readers why they should care/why the subject matters?

■ Is the writing clear, simple and understandable, especially in the lede?

■ Good use of quotes? Do the quotes provide information rather than just being quotes?

■ Are the facts there?

– *Are publication, researcher and other study details properly cited?*

■ Does it go beyond the basics?

– *Is there style, creativity, or originality in the piece?*

Science journalism lingo

- Lede/lead - the first sentence or first few sentences of a story, intended to draw in readers

- Nut graph - a paragraph, usually somewhere between the 3rd and 5th of a news piece, that tells readers what the story is about and why they should care

- Quote - exactly what the person said, except for "um," "ah" and "like."
  - *Don't use quotes for paraphrasing*

- Inverted pyramid - the idea that the most important information goes first
  - *Get to the point firs before explaining how you got there*

- Feature story - a story that may have some news in it, but is generally less timely with more perspective and "color"

- Color – literary description that helps the reader "see" the scene you're writing about
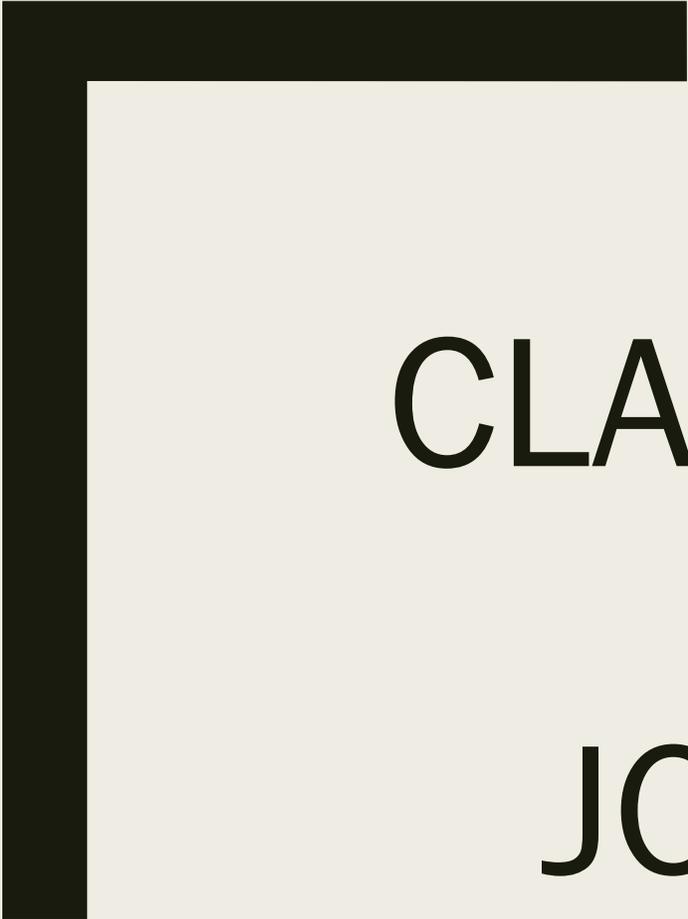
CLASS EXERCISE - IS IT GOOD JOURNALISM?

Articles

- Group 1: https://www.statnews.com/2019/02/05/newborn-twins-menkes-disease-experimental-copper-treatment/

- Group 2: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/21/style/glitter-factory.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur&fbclid=IwAR2hqXKPrgRZZRROQ_41MNbjy4TkCEpedLF-h7ak5yX_uHTJaxjvz07ia8U

- Group 3: https://undark.org/2019/02/06/vaccine-exemptions-children/

- Be sure to pay attention to
  - *Points that make the piece good*
  - *Points that make the piece bad*
  - *Specific lingo elements (e.g. what is the lede? What is the nut graph?)*