



You Don't Have to be a Star to Shed New Light

A Guide for Telling the Addiction Research Story to the Public

John T. O'Neill, L.C.D.C. and Carlton Erickson, Ph.D.

An African Folk Tale

A long ago African chief resolved to host a feast designed to unify his far-flung kingdom. He sent runners out to all the villages instructing them to send a representative to a great feast. Each representative was to bring a container full of the finest wine from his village.

One village had no wine. Their representative came up with a clever solution and departed for the feast. At the most solemn moment of the gathering each representative came forward and poured his wine into a large cask in front of the chief's throne. The great chief then came forward and stirred the wine to symbolize the unity of his kingdom.

He took a decorated gourd, reached in and drank from the cask. His face turned from surprise to anger to sadness. It was all water.

**If not you, who?
If not now, when?**

The Need

Scientific research is driven by curiosity, knowledge, and intelligence but it is fueled by money. **Without sufficient funding, great ideas are of little value.** Most research in the United States is supported by the government with decisions about the amount and priorities subject to politics. In this country political decisions are powerfully influenced by public advocacy. The loudest voice gets the most dollars. Consequently, research funding is often not prioritized according to need but rather by the potency of public clamor for progress.

Public advocacy is critically missing in the addiction field. With other public health problems, the victims and their loved-ones are the core of advocacy. In the case of addictive disease, most of the victims are in denial that they have the illness, and their loved-ones are so traumatized by the painful dynamics of their situation that they do not speak out. This means that researchers themselves must become more visible advocates for the value of their own work. For the most part this has not been the case, so funding for alcohol and drug research has been insufficient, tentative, and vulnerable to the economic winds. Ironically, the economic, social, and public health and safety case for aggressive, far sighted, and sustained support of addiction research is far stronger than for many, much better supported health research activities. The proof is there, what is lacking is the voice. That voice must emanate from the science community itself.

The Challenge

Speaking about science to the general public presents certain barriers. The most formidable is that scientists have not been inclined to do so. Their education and training has neither motivated nor prepared them for this mission. A recently-completed multi-year effort to provide public speaking and media skills training to NIAAA and NIDA funded agencies was met with limited enthusiasm. The most usual comment was, "I have more important things to do with my time". The obvious rebuttal is that if they don't get their grants funded they will have plenty of time. It has been estimated that **if every addiction scientist spent 30 minutes a month** telling a member of the public about research, the general public's understanding of addiction would be greatly increased over a period of five years.

A second barrier is the **limited scientific literacy in the general population.** While skill and knowledge, especially in the information technology field, have increased, basic science knowledge has decreased. It is entirely possible to graduate from high school today with only a limited science education and from college with little more. Yet these graduates represent the future voting population of our nation and some will even be elected to positions affecting public policy and research funding. Unless the message is more widely heard, scientific research in general, and addiction research in particular, will continue to be very low on their intellectual horizons.

Advertising people use the term "dumbing down" to describe the challenge they face in communicating with the average listener/viewer. It is somewhat derogatory but the term is reflective of the difficulty of reaching people in this age of information overload and sound bite mentality. **Talking about addiction research to lay audiences requires clear, concise, easily-understood language delivered by a competent communicator.** But as the title says, "You don't have to be a star to shed new light". Certainly Carl Sagan, Jacob Bronowski, or Stephen Hawking would not be cast as network anchors yet each has been a high impact spokesperson for their scientific area.



“Just Do It”

...you really don't have to be a star to shed light on the important work of addiction research.

Organizing a Talk

It's as simple as 1-2-3...

1. Get their attention.
2. Tell your story.
3. Reinforce your message.

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Getting Started

Suppose you decide to accept the challenge to tell your research story to the public. Who would watch or listen? How would you go about being invited?

It isn't necessary to get on prime time network television to have an impact. **Most individuals who develop into spokespersons on behalf of their professional activities start at the local level.** Perhaps they are asked to give a talk to their child's school group. Maybe a friend asks them to describe their work to a business group. Here are some examples of “entry level” opportunities to tell the world about addiction research. These are just a few of the opportunities to deliver your message:

- ★ Professional, business, and fraternal groups
- ★ Local print media
- ★ Local access television
- ★ Newsletters
- ★ Youth science programs
- ★ Radio and television interview shows
- ★ Web pages
- ★ Clinician gatherings
- ★ Lay language publications such as books, booklets, pamphlets

This booklet contains guidelines on how to connect with these prospects and how to be successful when you do. Try it; you'll be pleased with the results. (Note: If your institution has a media relations office be sure to learn their policies and seek their support.)

The public learns about what's happening in the scientific world through print and broadcast media. The program chairpersons, producers, and editors who fill the meeting rooms, radio time, TV screens, and print publication pages are hungry for new and interesting information and stories. With a bit of preparation and effort on your part you can fill some of that information space with the story of your work. This is your opportunity to tell why it's important and in need of public understanding and to stress that you really don't have to be a star to shed light on the important work of addiction research.

Public Speaking

Background

Some of the most accomplished, in-demand speakers made their first public presentation to their child's third grade class, a local Girl Scout troop, or a dozen friends at the local library. **The easiest way to get started as a science communicator is to speak at local, non-threatening gatherings.** It is almost axiomatic that as your skill and comfort level grows so will the size and importance of your audiences.



Helpful Hints

- ★ Assume that most of your audience have had negative experiences with an addicted person.
- ★ Begin and end your talk with a memorable statement.
- ★ Make eye contact to establish a relationship with your audience.
- ★ Include personal experiences.
- ★ Thank your sponsors and the audience.
- ★ Don't read a speech unless you absolutely must. It is better to speak from an outline.
- ★ Don't tell the audience that you're nervous. They know you are because they have been there.
- ★ Don't eat or drink too much before a talk. It can reduce alertness and make you sleepy.

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Public Speaking Cont.

Connecting

If you feel that your work is worthwhile, then you have a story to tell that is worth hearing. Accepting opportunities to speak to business, fraternal and professional groups is usually the first step in becoming a science communicator. Such organizations usually have a program chairman whose job it is to find interesting speakers for what may be as many as 50 weekly meetings a year. They are always pleased to be contacted by a professional who has an interesting program, activity or project to discuss.

Nervous?

Relax. You're just talking. It's something you do everyday. You know your material or you wouldn't be there. It helps to become familiar with the place in which you will speak. Arrive early, walk around the speaking area and practice using the microphone and any visual aids. Get to know your audience. Introduce yourself to some of them as they arrive. Ask them about their work, hobbies, science education background, etc. Remember that people want you to succeed. They expect that you will be interesting, stimulating, informative, even entertaining. They don't want you to fail. Forget the need to be perfect – no speaker is.

Organizing a Talk

It's as simple as 1-2-3. The following is an outline followed by many effective speakers:

1. Get their attention

Get your audience's attention. Give them a reason to listen. Establish the theme of your talk. Employ an exciting opening statement, story or meaningful quote. Then tell them what you are going to talk about.

2. Tell your story

Giving a speech about research and its importance is really just telling a story about what you and your colleagues do and why it is important. Think of it as a response to the question, "What is it you do, and why do I want to know about it?" You are aware of facts, events, discoveries, possibilities that your audience will benefit from knowing. It may seem like old stuff to you, but it is brand new information to most of your audience. (This is good practice for your scientific presentations!) This main body of your talk is simply relating in an organized fashion the aspects of your work that will be of interest to your listeners. It helps to break your story into separate points (three is suggested). In each segment tell them the facts, their importance, and potential benefit to them.

3. Reinforce your message

Revisit your primary theme and then briefly summarize the main points. You want to nail down the core of your message in the minds of your audience. Emphasize again the benefits of your research to them and their community. Try to close with a memorable phrase. "Keep your eyes on the news because the work I have told you about today will translate into a healthier and happier life for you and your family in the years to come".

To greatly increase your public speaking ability join Toastmasters International (www.toastmasters.org). An hour a week will produce a lifetime of improvement.



Helpful Hints

To organize a lay language research article include:

1. Headline or Title – Catch the reader’s eye.
2. Lead sentence – Use a question or a provocative statement.
3. State the facts – Keep it simple, clear, concise, and easily understood.
4. Tell why those facts are important – Who else says so? What are the immediate and long term consequences?
5. Describe a personal, social, or economic benefit – Answer the unspoken question in every reader’s mind, “SO WHAT?”
6. Summarize – Wrap it up.
7. Close with a memorable statement.

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Print Media

Background

Magazines, newspapers, newsletters, web pages, and even letters to the editor are all ways to communicate to the general public the facts and benefits of addiction research. Editors and publishers of these publications are always open to articles, news releases, and opinion/editorial pieces of interest to their readership. Very few newspapers have a full time science writer so they depend on solicitations from outside sources. (There are approximately 1800 daily newspapers in the U.S., but only about 50 have full time science writers.) The interest is there – science museums and related facilities draw 150 million visitors a year – more than baseball, football, basketball, and Disney World combined. The average person may think he or she does not have an interest in addiction research, but if your work is of value there are plenty of readers who would like to know more about what you do.

Connecting

Getting into print is a matter of approaching the right person and that person is usually the editor. Somewhere within every publication is the masthead that lists the name and contact information for submission of articles, news releases, or letters to the editor. If your piece is short, submit the entire work. If it will require several columns it is best to submit a brief proposal stating the highlights of the piece and reasons why that particular publication’s readership would be interested. Follow up with a phone call to be sure your correspondence has reached the right hands. Keep in mind that you are not trying to publish the great American novel. Editors of print publications are hungry for material and are likely to accept any interesting, well written submission.

Writing for Lay Readers

Considering the level of technological and scientific advancement in the U.S., one would expect a fairly high level of scientific knowledge among the general population. Yet, in today’s age of specialization, it is possible for students to complete even higher education without much in the way of science education. Thus it is best to assume that your readers are intelligent but not necessarily knowledgeable about science in general, and addiction research in particular. The art of effective writing for the print media has moved toward a much less formal, almost conversational style. Thus, the longstanding guide to speakers, **‘tell ’em what you’re going to tell ’em, tell ’em, and then tell ’em what you told ’em’** is still a basic outline for an effective written piece.

Organizing a Lay Language Research Article

Nowadays an effective written piece closely parallels the pattern you would use to tell the story verbally. Here is an outline used by professional news writers.

1. Headline or Title – Catch the reader’s eye. *All American Beers Are Not Equal*
2. Lead sentence – Can be a question or a provocative statement. *Despite the increase in light beer sales, there has been a general increase in the overall strength of U.S. beer over the past 5 years.*
3. State the facts – Keep it simple, clear, concise, and easily understood. Don’t overuse statistics. Instead employ quotes, similes, metaphors and other familiar examples. *Americans are used to checking the calories, fat and other characteristics for the food they purchase but how many check the alcohol content of their beverage?*



Helpful Hints

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Print Media cont.

Organizing a Lay Language Research Article -- cont.

4. Tell why those facts are important – Who else says so? What are the immediate and long term consequences? – Weight control, avoiding DUI, staying within one's known limits, usefulness in public policy making, laws, etc.
5. Describe a personal, social, or economic benefit – Answer the unspoken question in every reader's mind, "SO WHAT?" Why is this information important to them, their families, profession, and society?
6. Summarize – Wrap it up. Don't leave your reader hanging. Restate your main points succinctly.
7. Close with a memorable statement. *"As someone once said, knowing what was in your drink can keep you out of the clink".*

Radio

Speaking on the Radio:

- ★ Use a normal conversational tone of voice.
- ★ Disconnect call waiting and other sources of background noise in your office.
- ★ Turn the radio down (there is a short but confusing time delay).
- ★ Have numbers for helpful resources (some callers will need a referral).
- ★ Assume your audience is intelligent but with limited scientific knowledge.
- ★ Keep in mind that the listeners are asking, "So what! Who cares! What's in it for me".

Background

Of all the print and broadcast media, radio is the most ubiquitous and accessible. Cities that can barely support one daily newspaper may have as many as a dozen or more radio stations. No other medium lets you describe and promote your work to thousands of people while sitting at home in your pajamas. Producers at several hundred talk stations in the U.S. are constantly looking for compelling guests who have interesting information. They want to attract listeners and increase ratings. If you can package the story of your research in exciting, attention-getting language and tell people of benefits to them as a result of your work, then you can be an effective and sought-after radio talk show guest.

Radio Time

Radio time is available for public interest programming. Broadcasters voluntarily contribute the equivalent of \$8 billion dollars worth of free air time for public service programming. It is estimated that everyday, more than 10,000 guests appear on approximately 6,000 radio talk or interview shows across America. Producers are always looking for interesting interview guests and most radio interviews are done by telephone, with no travel needed. Usually these programs are live, and include questions from call-in listeners. The talk radio audience is highly educated. Nearly half have graduated with a four-year college degree. In fact, research by the National Association of Broadcasters indicates that radio interview show listeners are 67% more likely to have a graduate degree than non-listeners.



Helpful Hints

Appearing on TV:

- ★ Create verbal pictures or bring graphics or other visuals.
- ★ Look at the interviewer but speak to the viewers (It takes much skill and practice to talk to the camera. Don't try it.)
- ★ Try to appear and act like a trusted friend.
- ★ Expect a distracting atmosphere (TV studios are a mass of cables, lights, scenery and equipment).
- ★ Men – wear over-the-calf sox.
- ★ Women – avoid extremely bright colors and too much jewelry.
- ★ Avoid embarrassment by considering the camera as always on and the microphone always hot.

And some facts you probably didn't know about the media:

- ★ Our communications are received through 38% voice, 55% body, and 7% content. (Radio and telephone, 78% voice and 22% content)
- ★ Advertisers say it takes 17 repetitions before a new term is remembered.
- ★ Radio is primarily a headline media, TV is an event media, and print is the media that provides the most detail.
- ★ Magazines do the best job of reporting science to the lay public.

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Radio cont.

Connecting

It's the producer rather than the host who books guests for these shows. An effective approach is to send the producer a copy of a book, article, or talk you have given or perhaps a news release or publicity piece that has been written about you or your work. Follow-up with a phone call. **Keep an eye out for news of the day that may have some relationship to your work.** Remember that these folks have a real challenge to fill daily air time with interesting guests. You'll be surprised how easy it is to become an on-the-air expert.

Call-in Talk Radio

One of the primary fuels of the stubborn stigma surrounding alcohol and drug issues is erroneous folklore. **And a major instrument of the spread of inaccurate, incomplete, or outdated information about addiction is the radio call-in show.** The usual format is for the host to raise some controversial topic. Listeners are then invited to call in and share their opinions. It may seem undignified or even beneath the propriety of a research scientist to get involved in one of these dialogues. Yet **a quick phone call** to insert validated research into one of these confusing cross talks might just prevent further spread of incorrect or even harmful information.

Television

Background

There are nearly 1000 television interview shows in the U.S. The typical addiction researchers may feel they lack the reputation, appeal, or skill to appear on one of the network interview shows, but that still leaves hundreds of locally-produced programs. Just as in radio, producers are always looking for interesting guests.

Connecting

As a visual media, television producers are looking for stories and interviews that are visual events. There are obviously plenty of "talking head" interview shows, but the best way to gain interest in your research work is to create a visual event: an exciting new piece of equipment, the opening of a new facility, research work that can be shown visually (brain scans, motion graphics, important professional gatherings, etc.)

In Front of the Camera

The secret to coming across well before the television camera is to be yourself... only a bit more so. The eye of the camera and its associated microphone seems to eat up the sensory data they collects. So to look "natural" you need to speak just a bit louder, make your gestures and facial expressions a little more pronounced, and raise your energy level slightly above "normal". No need to overact, change your usual conversational style, or be "professional". Just ratcheting-up a notch the way you usually communicate will do fine. The viewer doesn't expect interview guests to be polished TV personalities. In fact, too much smoothness can detract from your image as a practicing scientist. The idea is to project yourself at a high enough energy level for your message to carry though the camera and microphone and capture the attention of the viewer. Just be yourself...only a bit more so.



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Contacts

For additional information concerning addiction research, or public presentations about addiction and its research, contact Carlton Erickson (erickson.carl@mail.utexas.edu) or the author of this guide, John O'Neill (adrcc@mail.utexas.edu).

Or, visit the **Addiction Science Research and Education Center** at:

www.utexas.edu/research/asrec

General Guidelines for Lay-Language Scientific Presentations

- ★ There is really no such thing as “off the record.”
- ★ “No comment” is a guilty plea. Say, “I don’t know but I’ll find out for you.”
- ★ Avoid jargon, acronyms, and unexplained scientific terms.
- ★ Develop a core message that succinctly delivers the most important parts of your message.
- ★ Think wisdom not cleverness.
- ★ Simplify but don’t distort.
- ★ Maintain your dignity.
- ★ Don’t overgeneralize.
- ★ Use everyday language and familiar examples.
- ★ Respect the audience as uninformed but not stupid.
- ★ Learn to be uncomplicated yet accurate.

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