Although journals remain the major means of disseminating research knowledge within psychology, other types of outlets are needed to reach policymakers and the public. A model of dual dissemination is proposed in which psychologists continue to write articles for research journals and write different, complementary articles for popular outlets.

Keywords: dissemination, APA style, alternative outlets

“University faculties have done a superb job of communicating with each other and with their graduate students... but dissemination to a broad audience seems to have taken a back seat to disseminating our research findings to our peers” (Gutek, 1988, p. 1). Gergen (1995) asked, “How are we as psychologists to regard a discipline that succeeds primarily in speaking to itself?” (p. 394). Novelist Lessing (1992) lamented, “It is one of the paradoxes of our time that ideas capable of transforming our societies, full of insights about how the human animal actually behaves and thinks, are often presented in unreadable language” (p. A27).

The failure to communicate outside of psychology’s ranks has been recognized by numerous American Psychological Association (APA) presidents, including Zimbardo (2002), who described his professional life as having been guided by the exhortation of George Miller to “give psychology away.” Probably the clearest statement of this idea was made by Resnick (1995) following a survey of APA members: “APA membership has found something it can almost unanimously agree on—our need to better communicate the value of what we do to the public” (p. 2).

Suggested remedies call for better communication between psychologists and media representatives. Although journalists play an important role in communicating scientific information to the public, the findings they feature tend to be controversial or unusual. Because of this, psychologists cannot afford to leave journalists the sole responsibility of disseminating psychological research to the public. The press has its own agenda, which does not necessarily coincide with that of psychologists. I suggest a complementary strategy in which psychologists write their own articles for general audiences.

The goal of this article is to promote dual dissemination as a means of making behavioral science information more accessible. Instead of concentrating on a single article for a single medium—specifically, a technical article for a research journal—I advocate that psychologists continue to write articles for research journals plus different articles for other, nonoverlapping audiences. This is more than a clever ploy for padding publication lists: The objective is to convert behavioral science information into a form and medium accessible to people outside academe. Because I conduct research in environmental psychology, early in my career, I saw value in sharing my findings with architects. Clear evidence shows that these busy professionals do not read environmental psychology journals (Philip, 1996). My solution was to write well-illustrated pieces for design periodicals. Later, I continued this dual dissemination strategy in other topical areas.

Many Precedents

Psychology has a long tradition of dual dissemination. Joseph Jastrow, trained as an experimental psychologist and APA’s first treasurer in 1892, created a public exhibition of psychology for the Chicago World’s Fair; wrote a syndicated daily column called “Keeping Mentally Fit,” which appeared in over 150 newspapers; and contributed articles to popular magazines such as Atlantic Monthly and Harper’s (Fowler, 1999). He was known for his relaxed and clear writing style. His articles and essays were later collected in a popular book titled Fact and Fable in Psychology (Jastrow, 1900). William James, described as America’s greatest psychologist (Schultz, 1969), was committed to writing for multiple audiences. James wrote treatises on philosophical and methodological issues for colleagues, textbooks for students that became best sellers, articles for popular magazines, and political tracts for newspapers. James wrote passionately on behalf of the mentally ill and was associated with Clifford Beers in establishing the National Committee for Mental Hygiene to improve asylum conditions (Myers, 1986).

Researchers who share James’s commitment to social reform have a particular need for alternatives to research journals, only a few of which permit advocacy on controversial issues. A cognitive scientist who believes that school curriculum reform is necessary probably will not be able to publish recommendations in a cognitive science journal. Instead, he or she should seek opportunities to publish in general interest magazines, professional journals...
directed to school administrators and teachers, and the op-ed section of newspapers. These periodicals welcome articles on controversial issues that include suggestions for reform. Scientists are best placed to appreciate the significance of what they do, and their professional interest in accuracy is reinforced by the disapproval of colleagues at any errors or exaggerations (Maddox, 2003).

Another James who successfully practiced dual dissemination was James McConnell. Like William James a century earlier, McConnell wrote the best-selling introductory psychology textbook of his day. He also authored eight other books, 18 book chapters, and scores of technical articles, some of which appeared in prestigious periodicals such as Science, Nature, and American Psychologist. His nontechnical outlets included Carolina Tips, Road & Track, and Esquire. He published nine science fiction stories, wrote movie reviews, and sent letters to newspapers. McConnell’s writings brought his knowledge and insights as a psychologist to bear on social issues such as capital punishment and the prison system; his hobbies, sports cars and music; and the future, through the genre of science fiction.

Troubled by inadequate conditions of animal confinement, primate researcher and academic Terry Maple became a zoo reformer. Later, he was appointed the first psychologist to head a major zoo (Zoo Atlanta). His university gave him leave to serve in this important capacity. Both his reformer and his director roles required public support. While he continued to produce academic articles in refereed journals, he published books and articles for general audiences that emphasized the importance of wildlife conservation.

My experience has been that prejudice within academia against writing for general outlets is overblown, and there are rewards sufficient to overcome inertia and fear of disapprobation. However, motivation will not be sufficient without guidance and practice, which need not occur at the expense of journal style but as a complementary mode of dissemination, “public speak” alongside “journal speak.” Here are some reasons why I believe psychologists should write for nonjournal outlets:

1. To bring behavioral science knowledge to the attention of people who do not read research journals.
2. To maintain and increase public support for research and practice. Policymakers in particular may be unaware of the many fields in which psychologists work.
3. To link the personal and the professional.
4. To provoke feedback from diverse audiences. This can lead to invitations to lecture, consult, and serve as an expert witness.
5. To become a better undergraduate teacher. Crafting articles for general periodicals develops audience-friendly communication.
6. To advocate a position. Even in their areas of expertise, psychologists must go outside research journals to make their views known.
7. To provide feedback to people who participated in a study.
8. To reach people who can apply research and thereby yield insights about the applicability of the findings in new contexts. Serendipitous applications are most likely in periodicals with a broad and diverse audience. This can lead to new research questions and further application.
9. To secure monetary benefit. Most general periodicals pay author fees, with additional payments for photographs and secondary uses of the article.
10. To have a challenging avocation and postretirement activity.
11. To reach unexpected secondary audiences. Newspapers, magazines, and newsletters exchange material, borrow from one another, and put articles online.

Two Languages

The literature on research dissemination emphasizes the critical importance of format and style, including visual appeal, sensitivity to user context, and readability (Marsh & Glassick, 1988). In a frank account of working with psychology-trained authors, two professional editors described their struggles to stop authors from “using passive voice, bloodless prose, and hedged statements” (Josselson & Lieblich, 1996, p. 651), noting that such habits are exceedingly difficult to unlearn even when they are totally inappropriate to the ideas the authors want to convey. These editors recommended that students learn a range of styles to use as the occasion requires (Josselson & Lieblich, 1996). Discussing the epistemology of APA style, Maddigan, Johnson, and Linton (1995) considered the minimal use of direct quotations, the avoidance of distinctive met-
aphors and colorful word choices, and the lack of personal pronouns as part of a “rhetoric of objectivity” (Dillon, 1991, as quoted in Madigan et al., 1995, p. 433) and testimony to the “self-effacement of the scientist” (Madigan et al., 1995, p. 433) that “directly contribute to students’ acculturation into psychology” (Madigan et al., 1995, p. 434). Accuracy remains the primary consideration in discussing research findings, but this does not require authors to neglect the practical implications of their work or the responsibility to bring it to the attention of those who might apply it. An exclusive preoccupation with APA style limits the ability of psychologists to reach outside their discipline.

Graduate programs train their students in rules of academic style. Writing for the public requires specific training as well. A psychologist-author must visualize a new audience reading the article. For me, this is writing with my grandmother looking over my shoulder. My Kansas-born grandmother was a very intelligent, sensible person, and when she could not understand what I wrote, I knew there was something wrong, either with what I was saying or how I was saying it. I will not lend you my grandmother; you can find someone else to look over your shoulder to see that you write interesting things in an understandable way. Later, you will need another, more stern critic to represent colleagues’ response to popular writing, perhaps the Ghost of Tenure Committees Past, but that image should be kept in the background as you begin writing for a general audience. If the colleague surrogates intrude too early, you may never finish the article. There is no need to unlearn journal style. Instead, acquire additional modes of communication suitable for other audiences. The rules may be less formal than in writing for research journals, but they are no less important to getting published. Do not leave behind your professional identification so much as adapt your professional role for a new challenge, writing for the public.

The style requirements for popular periodicals are best learned from a perusal of recent issues. This will also reveal whether the publication carries articles by outside contributors (some periodicals produce all material in house). Articles in general periodicals must capture a reader’s attention quickly, often in the opening sentence, or else the reader turns the page. Pacing and personalization will hold audience interest through the body of the text. Writing intended to attract reader interest does not inevitably adulterate or distort behavioral science knowledge. On the subject of crafting articles on technical subjects for lay readers, neurologist Oliver Sacks (1992) recommended “simple language wherever possible, and technical language where necessary” (p. xviii). If the information offered is truly substantial, “it will easily survive a change in our style. If what we offer is not substantial, we have no business as a discipline” (Thorngate & Plouffe, 1987, p. 90).

I find it almost impossible to rewrite my journal articles for any other type of periodical. The rules of writing in the two outlets are so different that it is easier for me to remove the technical article from view and write another piece on the subject that is tailored to a different audience. Relying on the original text traps me in the straitjacket of journal style. When I have completed the nontechnical version, I review the original piece to see that I have the facts straight and included essential details.

The behavioral sciences are showing increased interest in multimethod research. Each method has its shortcomings, but these tend not to be the same limitations. Experimentation is limited by artificiality, interviews by sample and interviewer bias, observation by lack of control, and so on. The task of the researcher is not to choose the single best method; for almost all problems, several methods are better than one. The same argument can be made with respect to dissemination. There is no single best outlet for all types of studies. If your research involves significant visual documentation, plan in advance to publish your findings in something other than a research journal. The major behavioral science journals eschew photographs, and if they reluctantly accept one or two, the reproductions can be poor.

Humor is a valid means of describing a situation characterized by inconsistent, illogical, meaningless, and self-destructive actions. Humor is also an excellent way to desensitize controversial issues so imbued with emotion to impede productive discussion. There is no reason why behavioral scientists should be denied the use of satire or irony in presenting their ideas, although such devices are largely excluded from research journals. Fortunately, general magazines are open to the humorous treatment of serious issues.

I do not advocate that research journals adopt the stylistic conventions of other types of periodicals and suddenly open their pages to commentary, photo essays, and humor. Rather, my point is that if behavioral scientists want to use these formats, which may be effective means of communication in some circumstances, they should target alternative outlets from the start. These outlets are very useful for instructors who supervise student projects, which often take place in public settings. Over the years, my students have conducted numerous class projects and subsequently published articles describing their findings, but these articles have appeared less often in research journals than in other types of periodicals. Students who observed salad bars coauthored articles in trade magazines directed to the food service industry. Students who surveyed customers at a food co-op wrote pieces for the co-op newsletter. Interviews with older men in a city park resulted in a newspaper feature article. Publication brought immediate recognition for the student researchers, a definite plus on an application for graduate school or employment.

Research findings that lack the scope and breadth necessary for publication in a research journal may still interest other audiences. My campus created the first bicycle traffic circles in the nation and probably in the world. To give students firsthand experience in observational research and to provide useful data to campus administrators and others who might be interested in this innovation, my class conducted systematic observational studies and interviews with cyclists. At the outset, we realized that no mainstream behavioral science journal would be interested...
in the findings. We disseminated the research as an internal report to campus officials, in slide presentations to transportation planners, and as an article in a bicycling magazine (Stamm & Sommer, 1977). As a substitute for peer review, the draft report was circulated to knowledgeable people on and off campus.

Writing for the public represents only one strategy among several for linking behavioral research with practice and linking theory with action. Roles such as consultant, expert witness, public speaker, and commenter on an electronic mailing list are available. A synergy exists among them. Publishing an article on a topic of concern to a group in a periodical they read can bring invitations to speak at their meetings and may generate research support. When a psychologist’s activities are seen as directly benefiting a group, the group will serve as an advocate for the research and see the benefits of supporting additional studies.

What APA Can Do

Professional behavioral science organizations can take steps to encourage more of their members to write for the public. Panels and discussions on this issue can be featured at annual conventions. Awards can be given to psychologists who have done this particularly well. Marris (1992) suggested that “We can train social scientists to write better, with a larger sense of constituency” (p. C2). Journal editors are in a pivotal position to suggest alternative outlets to contributors. When an article has timely implications for practice or policy, the editor can suggest that the author write a different article for practitioners, the public, or others who are unlikely to read the technical version. This suggestion can be made independent of the decision to accept or reject the article.

REFERENCES

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