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REVIEW

Book Review: Palgrave Handbook of Science and Health Journalism

Reviewed Book

Walsh-Childers, K. and McKinnon, M. (2024).
Palgrave Handbook of Science and Health Journalism.
Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan

Reviewed by

George Claassen

Abstract

This comprehensive compilation of a wide variety of science communication scholars investigating science and health journalism, brought together by editors Kim Walsh-Childers and Merryn McKinnon, leaves one with mixed impressions.

Keywords

Health communication; Science and media; Science writing

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The book consists of 23 chapters divided into four parts, with introductory and concluding chapters by the editors ("Why Science and Health Journalism Matters" and "Conclusion" respectively). The four parts are functionally well organised: Part I is headed "Core Issues in Science and Health Journalism" (7 chapters), Part II covers "Reporting Formats and Audiences" (5 chapters), Part III lifts out "Key Science and Health Topics in the Media: Now and in the Future"(5 chapters), and Part IV's main theme is "The Impact of Science and Health Reporting" (4 chapters).

Some of the chapters cover multi-thematic issues in science and health reporting and could also have been slotted into a different part to where they were placed by the editors, indeed no easy task but which they fulfilled well. For a reviewer with a limited required number of words, the broad field covered here makes it impossible to concentrate critically on all aspects of how science and health journalism are reflected in the book.

As science and health issues are universal and reporting about them takes place all over the globe, one has to consider the scope of the contributors being included and their international locations. The handbook has 37 contributors of which, unfortunately, only two are still practicing science journalists; four are former science journalists, but now in academia. Geographically, the contributors are from the U.S.A. (15, of which five are from the University at Buffalo!), Australia (4), Portugal (2), Germany (2), the U.K. (2), Singapore (2), China (2), the United Arab Emirates (2), Brazil (1), Abu Dhabi (1), Canada (1), Romania (1), and Mexico (1).

Walsh-Childers and McKinnon set out the aim and scope of the handbook in their introduction. They write the "production and dissemination of information via the media is a *globally relevant process*. Yet … the research examining these processes tends to focus on understandings, experiences and perceptions *within a Western, developed context*. This provides only a narrow perspective of the opportunities, challenges and ideas of how to present science and health-related news to audiences. This book was created with *contributions from scholars from every continent*, each given the explicit task of incorporating *research from as global a body of research as possible* to attempt to broaden the perspectives presented" (p. 26, the reviewer's emphasis).

Unfortunately, this is a serious flaw in the handbook, that it refers only superficially to science reporting in Africa, the mother continent, with no contributor from Africa where serious health issues endanger millions of lives (Ebola, HIV, Mpox, malaria, tuberculoses, quackery and pseudoscience rife). Although contributor Lars Guenther is noted in his biography as being an Extraordinary Associate Professor at the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, he is German, based in Munich and not from Africa.

Science and health journalists from Africa face serious challenges where politicians often lead their citizens to believe pseudoscientific nonsense. Less than two decades ago, South Africa was decimated by HIV/Aids while Thabo Mbeki, its second president since the dawn of democracry in 1994, and his health minister propagated natural cures, leading to more than 300 000 deaths according to a study by Harvard University. I have written about this in the past, worthwhile repeating: "A South African faith healer convinces vulnerable members of his congregation to buy his 'holy' water to cure their illnesses, including HIV/Aids. The president of Gambia and former soldier, Yahya Jammeh, claims he can cure HIV/Aids, but only on Thursdays, while Fridays and Saturdays his herbal treatment will heal people of

asthma. Thousands of desperately ill people in Nigeria throw away their prescribed medicines in the false hope of being healed by the prayers of a Nigerian 'prophet', (now the late) Tenitope Joshua. Three seriously ill Springbok rugby heroes venture into the field of quackery and turn their backs on evidence-based medicine in the hope of recovery from cancer and motor neuron disease."

Walsh-Childers & McKinnon rightly point out, "In today's world, the volume and rapid spread of misinformation have worsened to the point that the World Health Organization, in the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic, warned of a global "infodemic" of misinformation" (p. 19).

Science and health journalists in Africa daily have to deal with this infodemic where not only politicians lead their citizens astray with anti-scientific political decisions, but the public is also bombarded by religious leaders who are anti-science and urge their flock not to be vaccinated but rather to find cures in prayer than in antiretrovirals to restrict the devastation of HIV/Aids, polio, measles and other children's diseases. Health journalists face a daunting task to inform an ignorant public when statements such as those of Datti Ahmed, the chair of the Supreme Council for Sharia in Kano state, Nigeria, refer to the Global Polio Eradication Initiative as "modern-day Hitlers … who have deliberately adulterated the oral polio vaccines with antifertility drugs and contaminated them with certain viruses which are known to cause HIV and Aids."

In this context, Alice Fleerackers and An Nguyen's chapter, "Treading Waters: The Many Socio-ethical Challenges of Science and Health Journalism", rightly emphasise "[T]hrough monitoring, verifying, reporting, and facilitating public debates around science events and issues of the day, science journalism has a far more crucial role for societies than popularising science knowledge; it provides a unique space for the public to become both well informed and critically engaged with science" (p. 478).

One can only hope that the myriad of science communication researchers in academia will indeed look at the *global* phenomena and challenges science journalists are dealing with daily. Unfortunately, this handbook fails in this regard despite the very wide field of dire issues in science and health reporting it covers. The voice of practicing science and health journalists are too faintly heard here, overpowered by the voices of theoretical science communicators. The handbook's contents thus flies in the face of the book's title.

About the author

Prof. George Claassen is a former head of the Department of Journalism at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. As science editor of various Media24 newspapers, he wrote a weekly column on science and health matters. He is the author of numerous books, also about science and health quackery, and is a science correspondent for the South African Broadcasting Corporation. He presented various courses for Unesco in Addis Abeba, Nairobi, Pretoria and Stellenbosch, and is a former director of the Centre for Science and Technology Mass Communication at Stellenbosch University. Since 2002, he has been the public editor (ombudsman) for Media24, and since 2018 for News24, Africa's largest news outlet. He is a board member of the international Organization of Newsombuds and Standards Editors.

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