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Transitions in Science Communication: Continuity and Change

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Academic saviourism: how well-meaning science communication can reproduce epistemic hierarchies

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Abstract

This theoretical article introduces academic saviourism as a concept that explains how inclusion efforts in science communication can at times unintentionally reproduce epistemic hierarchies, and end up being symbolic rather than transformative. Building on theories like Bourdieu's habitus, Archer et al.'s science capital, and Critical Race Studies' perspectives on the White Savior Industrial Complex, I draw out three interrelated manifestations of academic saviourism: (1) affective burdens on marginalised individuals, (2) the performative inclusion practices of science communication institutions, and (3) the underlying normative assumptions that shape how science communication actors understand marginalised communities' needs and participation.

Keywords

Social inclusion; Science communication: theory and models; Science communication and social justice

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1 ▪ Introduction

Science communication, as a field situated between research and practice, has undergone several transitions in its relatively short history. Initially shaped by deficit model assumptions that framed 'the public' as lacking scientific knowledge, science communication gradually shifted towards dialogical and participatory approaches [Metcalfe, 2019]. In line with Brossard and Lewenstein's [2010] framing, these models emphasise two-way interactions in which scientists and publics jointly negotiate meanings, respect diverse forms of knowledge, and build trust. This 'participatory turn' [Metcalfe et al., 2022, p. 2] has always aimed to reconfigure science communication at a structural level, positioning it as shared learning space and platform for multidirectional knowledge exchange. Alongside this shift, theoretical reflections have reconceptualised science communication as 'social conversation around science' [Bucchi & Trench, 2021], with publics framed not as monolithic audience but as diverse, situated, and those with agency. Further conceptual work has picked up these debates — most notably Gascoigne et al.'s [2022] 'Ladder of Power', which maps participation and authority in science communication and citizen science.

Beyond this, critical perspectives challenge not only the deficit-dialogue binary, but also the broader epistemic framing that positions science as singular, authoritative knowledge system separated from 'the public'. Although critiques of deficit and dialogue models have largely emerged from Europe, scholars working from decolonial and Global South perspectives argue that this separation reflects Eurocentric assumptions about knowledge, authority, and modernity. As Rasekoala [2023] notes, science communication overwhelmingly reflects Global North contexts despite taking place in highly diverse settings. Alternative approaches — such as queer-informed perspectives that emphasise fluid roles and knowledges and draw attention to the normative boundaries shaping science communication [Orthia & de Kauwe, 2023], and the Indian framework of *scientific temper*, which highlights citizen-led, context-specific and process-oriented forms of engagement [Kankaria & Chakraborty, 2024] — exemplify non-dualistic ways of conceptualising science-society relations. Together, they foreground relational and situated modes of knowledge-making that unsettle established distinctions between 'science' and 'public'.

These developments reflect broader transitions in the field, including growing attention to who is meaningfully included in science communication, and how. Marginalised groups — including Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC),[1] female and non-binary individuals, LGBTQIA+ individuals, people with dis/abilities, and low-income and/or working-class communities[2] — continue to face substantial systemic barriers to engaging with science [Dawson, 2019; Humm et al., 2024; Judd & McKinnon, 2021]. A growing body of empirical research shows how science communication can reproduce exclusionary dynamics despite its rhetorical commitments to inclusivity [e.g., Humm et al., 2020; Rosin et al., 2023]. Social justice perspectives further argue that science communication mirrors the inequalities embedded in science and society [e.g., Dawson, 2019; Finlay et al., 2021; Orthia & Roberson,

1. The author acknowledges her positionality as a White researcher in discussing issues of race. The terms White, Black and BIPOC are used as socio-political categories that reflect constructed identities and power relations rather than biological realities. This terminology follows current scholarly practice while recognising the limitations of any categorical language in capturing lived experiences.
2. This list represents a selection of key exclusion dimensions rather than a comprehensive overview. A typology of dimensions of exclusion and barriers in science communication, as well as approaches and advice for low-barrier science communication can be found in [Humm et al., 2024].

2023]. Yet, within this 'engagement hype' [Weingart & Joubert, 2019, p. 2], equity and inclusion often remain performative concerns negotiated in academic and policy arenas, while rarely being translated into individual or institutional science communication practice in more fundamental ways [Armstrong & Lock, 2023; Pino, 2023].

Although public engagement policies and frameworks now frequently emphasise diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) considerations, their implementation within higher education institutions is often reduced to easily measurable outputs or tokenistic acts [Armstrong & Lock, 2023; Dawson, 2019]. On one hand, while marginalised communities are increasingly being identified as key participants and represented within campaigns, such recognition often remains symbolic due to various factors, including, but not limited to, lack of empathy and 'a little due diligence' [Cole, 2012], that is, insufficient critical reflection and preparatory work to engage these communities. Their involvement also often remains limited to familiar tropes — such as supporting girls in STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine) — which serve to enhance institutional reputation and political legitimacy, rather than creating meaningful dialogue that addresses the structural and systemic conditions of such exclusion [Armstrong & Lock, 2023; Weingart & Joubert, 2019].

At this juncture, a critical question emerges: How might well-intentioned efforts toward inclusion unintentionally reproduce the very exclusions they seek to overcome? To help address this question, this paper introduces *academic saviourism* as a new term for better characterising such concerns. What follows is a brief outline, with a more detailed conceptualisation later in the article. In a nutshell, academic saviourism refers to well-intentioned yet unsolicited efforts in which academic or scientific actors position themselves as helpers in inclusion-focused engagement practices they assume to be universally valuable, while implicitly assigning marginalised individuals the role of passive beneficiaries. It also assumes that the value of science is self-evident, without questioning whether this aligns with the perspectives of the targeted marginalised communities. It manifests in three interrelated dimensions: (1) the affective burdens experienced by marginalised individuals and groups, (2) the performative inclusion practices of communicating institutions, and (3) the underlying normative assumptions that shape how science communication actors understand marginalised individuals' needs and participation.

This paper's central theoretical contribution lies in introducing the novel concept of academic saviourism through synthesising three complementary theoretical perspectives: *Critical Race Studies'* critiques of the *White Savior Industrial Complex* [e.g., Cole, 2012; Bex & Craps, 2016; Jefferess, 2021, 2024], Bourdieu's [1987; 2011] concepts of *academic habitus and capital*, the concept of *science capital* [Archer et al., 2015] as a domain-specific extension, as well as subject-specific discussions about DEIA in science communication [e.g., Canfield et al., 2020; Dawson, 2019; Fernandes & Norberto Rocha, 2022]. This synthesis enables an understanding of how well-intentioned inclusion practices in science communication may inadvertently reinforce existing hierarchies, and, in doing so, ironically contribute to contemporary forms of exclusion. This conceptualisation draws selectively on insights from a separate systematic literature review examining dimensions of exclusion and barriers in science and science communication [Humm et al., 2024].

Following Herbert Blumer's [1954] conception of *sensitizing concepts*, academic saviourism serves as a flexible analytical lens that draws attention to problematic patterns in well-intentioned inclusion practices while remaining open to empirical refinement and

contextual variation. Rather than offering new empirical findings, academic saviourism aims to encourage critical reflection on the intentions, assumptions, and positionalities embedded within inclusion-focused science communication practices. It speaks directly to current debates about transitions in science communication, by analysing how norms, values, and actor roles in science communication are evolving in response to calls for equity and social justice.

Naming the problem, however, is not the same as solving it. The article does not claim that problematisation alone can dismantle the structural barriers in science communication. Instead, it provides a critical vocabulary — academic saviourism — to recognise and spotlight exclusionary tendencies in science communication that persist beneath well-intentioned DEIA mandates, and to support more self-reflexive and socially just science communication practices.

To lay the conceptual groundwork, the next section brings together three strands of literature: first, debates on exclusion and marginalisation in science communication; second, the concepts of academic habitus, capital [Bourdieu, 1987; Bourdieu, 2011], and science capital [Archer et al., 2015], that help explain how these exclusions are reproduced; and third, critiques of the White Savior Industrial Complex [Cole, 2012; Bex & Craps, 2016; Jefferess, 2021, 2024], which serve as a lens for interrogating the role of good intentions in sustaining unequal power relations. These strands converge in the development of academic saviourism.

2 ▪ Exclusion in science communication, academic habitus and science capital

Research consistently shows that people outside dominant social groups like White, academically educated, and privileged demographics often face barriers to participating in science communication [Scheufele, 2018]. These barriers may not always be deliberately created, but they nevertheless impede meaningful engagement [Dawson, 2019; Humm et al., 2024]. Marginalised individuals, including BIPOC, female, and non-binary people, LGBTQIA+ individuals, those with dis/abilities, or chronic illnesses, individuals with limited formal education, and low-income, or working-class communities,[3] encounter both internal and systemic barriers to science communication [Humm et al., 2024]. These barriers affect and reinforce each other in many ways, best described by Crenshaw's [1989] framework of *intersectionality*: the simultaneous experience of multiple, overlapping systems of oppression [Judd & McKinnon, 2021; Humm et al., 2024].

Barriers in science communication manifest across multiple dimensions. Linguistic barriers emerge when English serves 'as a gatekeeper to scientific discourse' [Márquez & Porras, 2020, p. 1], as well as when science communication uses highly technical or abstract scientific language or images. Bullock et al. [2019], for instance, demonstrated that such scientific jargon greatly reduces comprehension and engagement among non-expert audiences. Cultural barriers arise from perceived habitual distance between communicators and communities. This includes 'academic or upper-class language' [Humm & Schrögel, 2020, p. 7], condescending attitudes, overuse of academic titles, or the usage of idioms or

3. See footnote 2: This list represents a selection of key exclusion dimensions.

specific cultural references — all of which can alienate non-academic audiences further [Bourdieu, 1987; Humm & Schrögel, 2020]. Accessibility barriers include physical obstacles for people with disabilities, as well as attitudinal barriers and communication challenges that render spaces or formats exclusionary [Fernandes & Norberto Rocha, 2022; Rocha et al., 2020]. Representational barriers stem from the lack of diverse science communicators and relatable role models [Canfield et al., 2020; Motion & Wallace, 2023]. Lastly, relevance barriers arise when science communication fails to connect with the lived experiences, contexts, and concerns of marginalised communities [Rosin et al., 2023]. As Weingart et al. [2019] note in the South African context, many people 'do not have the luxury, nor the educational background' [2019, p. 6] to engage with abstract science unless it directly impacts their lives. While such barriers affect all science communication, they become particularly problematic from a DEIA perspective because 'conventional' science communication approaches often interpret disengagement not as a legitimate preference but as a deficit to be addressed — thereby overlooking the structural conditions that create exclusion in the first place.

These exclusion patterns are not accidental but reflect deeper structural inequalities. Sociological frameworks, like Pierre Bourdieu's [1987; 2011] theory of habitus and capital offer key concepts for understanding how social structures and hierarchies are embodied, normalised, and reproduced. The concept highlights how class position influences one's access to cultural, and thus scientific spaces. In Bourdieu's terms, habitus refers to deeply ingrained dispositions, such as ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, that are shaped by one's social position [1987]. These dispositions structure what individuals perceive as 'normal', desirable, or legitimate within a given social field — in other words, what 'feels natural'. Habitus is structured by access to the four forms of capital, which, according to Bourdieu [2011] are economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. These four forms of capital influence one's capacity to participate and gain recognition, power, and status in institutional contexts. In science communication, this means that individuals who lack familiarity with abstract scientific language, or jargon, norms, or settings may not feel welcome, as they don't see themselves as legitimate participants or 'science persons' [Dawson, 2019; Humm et al., 2020]. Of course, not engaging with science by choice is entirely legitimate. Yet from a Bourdieusian perspective, disengagement is often shaped less by individual preference than by structural conditions that determine who feels able or entitled to participate in the first place.

These mechanisms are often implicit and self-reinforcing. Scientists and communicators may inadvertently expect a certain way of speaking, behaving, or engaging with knowledge, that aligns with the academic habitus. Those who do not share these dispositions may feel alienated, even when formally invited [Dawson, 2019]. In this sense, exclusion is not always the result of explicit gatekeeping, but of subtle cultural and communicational codes, that structure the field of science communication as an ambassador of science itself.

While Bourdieu's concepts provide a foundational understanding of how social inequalities reproduce, Archer et al. [2015] have extended this framework specifically to science education and participation through their concept of science capital. Here, I use science capital analytically to illuminate structural participation patterns. Science capital proves particularly relevant for understanding science communication dynamics, which fundamentally involve dialogical engagement with heterogeneous publics [Brossard & Lewenstein, 2010; Bucchi & Trench, 2021; Gascoigne et al., 2022; Metcalfe, 2019; Metcalfe

et al., 2022]. It is 'a conceptual device for collating various types of economic, social, and cultural capital that specifically relate to science [...]' [Archer et al., 2014, p. 5]. As a multidimensional concept, it includes scientific knowledge and literacy, interest, dispositions, social networks, and engagement practices. It helps explain why some individuals and groups are more likely to participate in science-related activities, pursue science careers, or feel comfortable in science spaces than others. Science capital accumulates over time through access to educational resources, science role models, and informal learning experiences such as museum visits or science media consumption. It manifests through multiple dimensions of gender, class, academic tracking, and identity formation [Archer et al., 2015]. Students with low science capital (typically female and/or from non-academic families) may find science interesting but do not see it as 'for them', while those with high science capital (typically male and/or from well-educated families) develop stronger scientific ambition, and more easily identify as 'science persons' [Archer et al., 2015]. People from marginalised communities, such as working-class, low-income, racialised and ethnic minority families, often have limited access to these resources, not because of individual disinterest, but due to structural inequalities in education, leisure, and labour markets. As a result, they may perceive science and its sites as being 'not for people like me' [Dawson, 2014, p. 990].

These sociological and education-based frameworks offer valuable insights into how structural exclusion operates within science communication. They explain who is being left out, and how such exclusion is reproduced through social and cultural mechanisms. However, what has received limited attention in science communication discourses are the ways in which seemingly well-meaning inclusion efforts may themselves reproduce asymmetrical power relations, particularly when outreach is pursued without invitation, and guided by implicit moral assumptions of deficit compensation. That is, existing frameworks help explain exclusion but overlook how inclusion can reproduce dominance in subtle ways. To further examine this issue, the next section turns to a body of literature that originates outside the science communication field but offers a useful perspective for analysing such dynamics. Critical Race Studies' White Savior Industrial Complex [Cole, 2012] reveals how communicative practices, even when framed as inclusive, can reinforce the very hierarchies they seek to challenge.

3 ▪ The white savior industrial complex

In 2012, Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole coined the term White Savior Industrial Complex (WSIC) in a series of seven Twitter posts responding to the *Kony* 2012 campaign and documentary organised from the NGO 'Invisible Children'. Cole [2012] defines the WSIC as a set of discursive and structural practices through which White, privileged individuals, particularly from countries with colonial histories, engage in development, educational, or humanitarian projects ostensibly aimed at helping non-White people in regions affected by colonialism. According to Bex and Craps [2016], the term is coined after *'Military Industrial Complex'*, suggesting that charitable organisations form a self-perpetuating industry that depends on maintaining the problems it claims to solve.

Although these interventions are typically framed by practitioners, institutions, and media as altruistic and well-meaning, they reproduce historically rooted power hierarchies stemming from colonialism by positioning White actors as heroic rescuers of racialised others [Jefferess, 2024]. As Cole [2012] argues: 'The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about

justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.' This observation illustrates the problematic nature of such humanitarian interventions. Bex and Craps [2016] demonstrate in their analysis of the Kony 2012 campaign, that such narratives position 'the Western activist [as] the only imaginable object of empathy' while reducing those supposedly being helped to objects of 'patronizing sympathy' [2016, p. 44], rather than acknowledging their knowledge, agency, or needs.

Cole [2012], in turn, emphasises that effective humanitarian work requires more than simply 'making a difference'. He points out that the most important thing is not to harm anyone in the first place [Cole, 2012] — a principle at odds with the reality that the Global North continues to benefit from the ongoing effects of colonialism [Jefferess, 2021]. Furthermore, humanitarian aid must respect communities' agency to determine which measures are truly helpful, and necessary [Cole, 2012]. The WSIC perpetuates imperialist assumptions of superiority and progress through well-meaning, yet self-centred, and patronising practices, while also masking the underlying systemic injustices [Bex & Craps, 2016; Jefferess, 2024]. Cole's [2012] critique and the WSIC concept can be situated within long-standing work in *Black Studies and Critical Race Theory* on how White 'helping' serves White interests while preserving the very racialised injustices from which White people benefit [Bell, 1980], and have catalysed systematic academic engagement with WSIC dynamics across various fields.

In film and media studies, analyses of the White saviour trope encompass a wide range of genres, from sports films to narratives about teachers in disadvantaged schools [Vera & Gordon, 2003; Korzeniewska-Nowakowska, 2024]. These narratives centre White protagonists while reducing racialised co-characters to dramaturgically underdeveloped projection screens for White virtue [Hughey, 2014]. Even films based on real achievements of BIPOC individuals — such as *Hidden Figures* [Melfi, 2016] and *The Blind Side* [Hancock, 2009] — are directed and shaped by White filmmakers, framing racism as an individual problem solved through White allyship and perseverance, typically ending in redemptive closure [Sayed, 2019]. This reflects Toni Morrison's notion of the *White Gaze*, which positions White perspectives as the normative lens on Black and racialised experiences [Wright, 2023].

Similar patterns appear in development studies, where scholars critique the enduring legacy of saviour narratives, exemplified by 'short-term voluntourism[4] by unqualified Northern youth' [Jefferess, 2021, p. 423], satirised on social media (e.g., *Barbie Savior* [Wearing et al., 2018]), and described as 'self-serving or specifically harmful' [Jefferess, 2021, p. 423]. Jefferess [2021] describes it as short-term, often holiday-like trips in which young volunteers from the Global North engage in development or humanitarian projects in the Global South, usually without relevant expertise and largely shaped by institutional priorities rather than community needs. Aid and development industries, critics argue, remain embedded in colonial power relations and White supremacist ideologies, which present themselves as benevolent rescue efforts [Bandyopadhyay, 2019; Pallister-Wilkins, 2021]. Such critiques resonate with emerging concerns in science communication, where privileged actors similarly position themselves as well-meaning experts 'reaching out' to allegedly deficient communities, thereby reproducing entrenched power imbalances.

4. A portmanteau for volunteer tourism used by Jefferess [2021].

According to Callwood et al. [2022], 'racism remains a root cause of underrepresentation of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx scholars across STEM' [Callwood et al., 2022, p. 1]. This problem reproduces in science communication, which they argue operates within a White supremacist system [Callwood et al., 2022]. Using Crenshaw's [1989] intersectionality framework, race and ethnicity are understood as intertwined with other dimensions of exclusion mentioned above. As Canfield and Menezes [2020] explain, 'accepted approaches of science communication centre a Western, white, ableist,[5] and patriarchal understanding [...]' [2020, p. 13]. A key characteristic of these approaches is their short-term nature, mirroring the dynamics Jefferess [2021] critiques under the label of voluntourism. This critique parallels literature on science communication for marginalised groups, where sustained relationships and trust-building are essential due to histories of systemic oppression [Berhe, 2020; Dawson, 2019; Humm et al., 2024]. Assumptions about knowledge deficits, or a presumed eagerness to engage with science communication, can be perceived as patronising and hinder communication on equal terms.

While the *WSIC* primarily addresses racialised dynamics rooted in colonial histories, the patterns it exposes are not limited to race, ethnicity, and cultural background alone. In science communication, these dynamics intersect with other forms of discrimination, including but not limited to classism, ableism, and gendered exclusions [Canfield et al., 2020; Dawson, 2019]. To capture the complexity of these overlapping structures, the following sections introduce the novel concept of academic saviourism that brings an explicitly intersectional lens to the analysis of well-intentioned, yet asymmetrical, science communication practices.

4 ▪ Defining academic saviourism

Academic saviourism derives from integrating the three complementary theoretical perspectives examined in sections 2 and 3. Bourdieu's [1987; 2011] concepts of habitus and capital provide the foundational sociological framework, which Archer et al. [2015] adapt as science capital to understand how cultural advantages operate within science contexts specifically. DEIA scholarship [e.g., Canfield et al., 2020; Dawson, 2019] documents how these dynamics manifest within science communication practice, revealing persistent patterns of exclusion as well as problematic inclusion efforts. Yet this combination lacks the critical component that explains how well-intentioned inclusive science engagement can perpetuate the very inequalities it seeks to address. Critical Race Studies, particularly the WSIC [Cole, 2012; Jefferess, 2021, 2024; Bex & Craps, 2016], provides this missing element, revealing how ostensibly altruistic interventions can reinforce power imbalances. These theoretical perspectives are therefore transferred to science communication contexts. The resulting concept examines how well-meaning inclusion efforts in science communication can reproduce exclusion across intersectional dimensions of marginalisation.

Academic saviourism can be defined as well-intentioned, yet unsolicited, inclusion-focused science communication practices that presume the universal benefits of science, regardless of the targeted people's contexts, needs, or consent. Such practices frame marginalised individuals as passive recipients of benevolent inclusion, often reinforcing rather than dismantling existing epistemic hierarchies. By centring the moral self-image of institutions or

5. Ableist refers to attitudes or structures that marginalise or disadvantage people with dis/abilities by treating certain bodies or abilities as the norm.

practitioners, academic saviourism turns DEIA into a performance rather than a transformative, relational practice. This performative approach gratifies those implementing such initiatives in ways that can overshadow or substitute for meaningful benefits to the marginalised communities they seek to support. As a sensitizing concept according to Blumer [1954] academic saviourism highlights how inclusion efforts can reproduce power asymmetries, even when framed as progressive, or participatory.

For an illustrative example take a research institute launching a 'Community Science Advisory Board' with great fanfare, recruiting diverse community representatives and generating media coverage about inclusive governance. However, the board meets only twice yearly, receives no compensation for members' time, and is consulted only after research priorities and funding decisions have already been made. The institute uses the board's existence to demonstrate commitment to community engagement in grant applications while maintaining complete control over research agendas. Although such advisory structures can facilitate genuine community input, this example highlights how academic saviourism manifests when inclusion serves institutional legitimacy rather than authentic collaboration.

Central to academic saviourism is the assumption held by science communication institutions that science is inherently valuable, and that engagement is universally desirable. Academic saviourism extends beyond general science communication challenges because it rests on the belief that engagement with marginalised groups will 'make a difference'. This moral framing reinforces unequal positions between those who define what counts as benefit and those who are expected to receive it. But as Dawson [2019] already recognises, the history of science is 'marked by colonialism, racism, misogyny, ableism, homophobia and heteronormativity and other forms of oppression [...]' [2019, p. 30]. Ignoring this history — academic saviourism approaches prioritise access over transformation, overlooking the subtle exclusions that result from expanding participation without simultaneously reforming scientific structures [Armstrong & Lock, 2023; Dawson, 2019].

Building on the theoretical discussion above, this section applies the concept of academic saviourism and examines how it manifests in contemporary science communication practice. Following Dawson's [2019] observation that 'attempts at inclusive practice can be understood as assimilationist and crusade-like in approach' [2019, p. 30], the concept highlights how symbolic, affective, and institutional mechanisms work together to maintain and sustain inequality. It traces three interconnected dimensions through which academic saviourism manifests: (1) the affective burdens imposed on marginalised individuals forced to navigate subtle exclusions and microaggressions; (2) the performative nature of many inclusion practices that serve institutional self-legitimisation rather than actual transformation; and (3) the normative assumptions science communication makes about marginalised communities' needs and modes of participation.

5 ▪ Manifestation 1: affective burdens

Exclusion in science communication operates through embodied and affective channels. Dawson's [2019] study of low-income and minority ethnic groups' experiences with science museums and centres in the U.K. starkly demonstrates how structural barriers translate into deeply personal experiences of exclusion. Dawson [2019] shows how racialised people with low science capital experience public science spaces as exclusionary, effortful, and ones that

require substantial emotional labour[6] to 'fit in' while simultaneously navigating feelings of not belonging to such spaces. Participants reported discomfort, tiredness, and frustration, which are signs of misrecognition that indicate how science communication can perpetuate social hierarchies, even when aiming to include.

These findings are in line with what Critical Race Studies have called *racial battle fatigue*. Smith et al. [2011] have defined it as the 'stress of unavoidable front-line racial battles in historically white spaces' [2011, p. 301], leading to psychological and physical symptoms, as well as emotional exhaustion due to racial microaggressions. Such battles are not characterised solely by overt acts of racism, but also by the accumulation of subtle, everyday insults that are often inadvertently delivered and interrelated with other dimensions of exclusion [Smith et al., 2011]. This suggests that visiting science museums, attending outreach events, or engaging with scientific discourse are also neither a neutral nor a beneficial act for marginalised individuals. Instead, they must adapt to settings shaped by the habitus of the academically privileged class, as conceptualised by Bourdieu [1987], rather than being designed with their own experiences in mind [Dawson, 2019]. Engagement in these settings often requires understanding unfamiliar codes, navigating implicit expectations, and withstanding subtle signals of not belonging, while simultaneously attempting to signal legitimacy, openness, and gratitude [Dawson, 2019; Humm et al., 2020].

Take, for instance, a participatory research project that seeks to include the perspective of people with intellectual dis/abilities in co-creating an assistive technology. At an initial workshop, people with intellectual dis/abilities are invited but become overwhelmed when researchers communicate in complex academic language, having failed to prepare their lengthy presentations and discussions in Easy Read. Instead of changing the way the workshops are organised, subsequent workshops include only representatives without dis/abilities, excluding the intended participants and their lived experiences. This illustrates how inclusion efforts, despite good intentions, can burden marginalised communities with navigating inappropriate settings rather than transforming institutional practices.

Affective burdens are reinforced through the material and symbolic barriers previously described in section two. They underscore the limitations of inclusion strategies that rely on bringing people into existing structures without transforming those structures themselves [Armstrong & Lock, 2023]. Simply inviting people in does not eliminate exclusion, if the environment remains coded for others. Science communication thus risks placing the burden of adaptation on those already marginalised, expecting them to accommodate a social field that does not reciprocate.

6 ▪ Manifestation 2: performative inclusion

Alongside the affective dimensions of exclusion, it is necessary to examine how institutional frameworks in science communication formalise inclusion in ways that are often more symbolic than fundamentally transformative. Science communication policies like the German-based 'Public Engagement Codex' [Berlin School of Public Engagement and Open Science & Cyber Valley, 2023], or the U.K.-based 'STFC public engagement strategy 2024–2028' [Science and Technology Facilities Council, 2024], now frequently emphasise

6. 'Emotional labour' refers here to the effort of managing emotions and maintaining composure in exclusionary or unwelcoming settings, following Hochschild's original notion of the term [1983].

DEIA. However, when translated into institutional practice these frameworks often become instruments of organisational performance rather than vehicles of structural transformation.

Weingart and Joubert [2019] described this as a 'widening gap between talk and action, between "motives espoused" by science policy and "motives enacted" by the respective organisations commissioned to develop and implement science communication formats.' [2019, p. 2] As a result, DEIA is turned into a representational task: who is present, who appears in promotional materials, or how many bodies were 'reached' by the offers. Pino [2023] highlights this contradiction, noting that institutions' well-intentioned collaborations with community consultants often result in segregated DEIA programmes that operate as add-ons rather than being integrated into a comprehensive institutional social justice framework — ironically reinforcing the very exclusion they aim to address.

Consider a natural history museum that creates a temporary Pride Month display showcasing queerness in the animal kingdom, generating positive media coverage about LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Once Pride Month concludes, the exhibit is removed while the permanent collection continues to present animal behaviour through 'heavily gendered and heteronormative' [Armstrong & Lock, 2023, p. 73] interpretations, revealing how performative gestures substitute for structural and cultural change.

Another example shows how institutions instrumentalise their own members for diversity purposes. A successful group leader at a research centre who is a woman of colour and mother finds that rather than showcasing her scientific achievements, the institution repeatedly requests her participation in panels about her personal journey and challenges of balancing motherhood with research. Meanwhile, male colleagues represent the centre's expertise at public events. While role model representation can be valuable, this exemplifies how inclusion initiatives can reduce those they claim to support to tokenistic roles, while simultaneously burdening them with the emotional labour of constantly representing their demographic rather than their expertise.

These examples reflect a broader tendency where the identification and targeting of marginalised publics becomes a checklist exercise rather than a relational commitment. As Weingart and Joubert [2019] observe, science communication formats are rarely evaluated in terms of transformative effects but rather by audience numbers and reach, with little emphasis on structural change. This critique is also mirrored by Dawson [2019], who argues, that science communication 'should be wary of claims made about inclusive practice on the basis of numbers alone.' [2019, p. 49].

Short-term, symbolic outreach activities, such as pop-up events or science festivals increasingly target 'migrants,' 'girls in STEMM,' 'first-generation students,' and 'disadvantaged families', reflecting practices that are 'largely still that of the "deficit model" approach.' [Weingart & Joubert, 2019, p. 2] This issue is amplified by the fact that many institutional communication strategies conflate motives and functions of science communication, namely 1) educational activities designed to inform the public and foster meaningful engagement; and 2) activities aimed at enhancing the reputation of scientific organisations and legitimising political institutions [Weingart & Joubert, 2019]. This conflation makes it difficult to distinguish between genuine engagement and reputation-driven initiatives.

While Humm and Schrögel [2020] acknowledge that also short-term and outreach-oriented science communication initiatives serve a purpose and are not harmful per se, they highlight how abrupt project endings leave participants frustrated and without long-term benefits. Over time, this pattern can erode trust in science communication and science more broadly. In doing so these initiatives resemble Global South volunteer tourism, which typically involves short-term development projects that are shaped more by institutional priorities than by sustained community needs [Jefferess, 2021]. Furthermore, the resulting visibility for DEIA becomes problematic when the participants are treated as symbols of inclusion rather than recognised as autonomous actors who can shape the terms of their participation [Feliú-Mójer, 2020; Pino, 2023]. This symbolic logic tends to overlook the structural conditions that create and maintain exclusion, as critiqued by Callwood et al. [2022] and Canfield and Menezes [2020]. As long as the modes of communication, the settings of engagement, and the criteria of legitimacy remain unchanged, simply diversifying the audience does not constitute equity. Instead, these acts may amount to tokenism, in which visibility replaces voice, and presence substitutes for participation.

In this setting, institutions reinforce their self-image as inclusive without altering the deeper hierarchies that shape their communicative practices. Similar to what Cole [2012] describes as a 'big emotional moment' for privileged actors, science communication risks performing inclusion in ways that reaffirm institutional legitimacy rather than redistribute power.

What distinguishes genuine inclusion from academic saviourism is the redistribution of narrative and institutional power. Feliú-Mójer [2020] and Pandya et al. [2025] argue that equity in science communication requires redistributing narrative and institutional power by actively involving marginalised communities as experts of their own experiences, rather than portraying them through reductive or deficit-based frames. This aligns with the top two rungs of Gascoigne et al.'s [2022] science communication 'Ladder of Power' — 'Deliberating' and 'Co-creating' — which highlight how community- led modes of engagement redistribute authority between scientists and publics. These approaches contradict saviouristic practices by emphasising shared authority, contextual sensitivity, and narrative agency. Their values are also reflected in the characteristics of 'Inclusive Science Communication' according to Canfield et al. [2020] or the CPAS Inclusive Science Communication Collective recent framework [2025], which can be described as reflexive and justice-oriented approaches that centre marginalised voices and promote transformative practice to change both science communication practice and institutional structures. In turn, academic saviourism serves as a concept for reflecting on tokenistic acts of DEIA in science communication. It thus draws attention to the disjuncture between inclusive rhetoric and the actual distribution of epistemic and procedural power.

7 ▪ Manifestation 3: normative assumptions

The aforementioned critique raises important questions about the assumptions that underpin many science communication initiatives. A recurrent logic in science communication is the idea that certain publics are 'disengaged' [Schäfer et al., 2018] or 'hard to reach' [Bonevski et al., 2014], and therefore require targeted interventions. While this framing may appear pragmatic, it often rests on deficit-oriented assumptions, which can also manifest in ostensibly participatory interventions [Canfield et al., 2020; Pandya et al., 2025; Pino, 2023; Weingart & Joubert, 2019].

For example, a STEMM outreach programme targeting young people through community centres in marginalised areas assumes participants need motivation and basic skills training. The programme designs activities around elementary concepts, without consulting the young people about their existing knowledge or interests beforehand. The participants, including those with extensive technical expertise gained through gaming, music production, or informal learning networks, find themselves patronised by explanations of concepts they already understand.

As illustrated above, marginalised communities are implicitly positioned as lacking knowledge, interest, or engagement, and thus as needing to be 'brought in'. The act of engagement is then conceptualised as a unidirectional offering: science extends itself outward, assuming that its value is self-evident and that participation is universally desired. In particular, academic saviourism can also become pronounced in dialogic or participatory formats, when practitioners engage with marginalised communities in non-reflexive ways lacking critical self-examination of their own positionality, habitus, and privileges as well as their assumptions and expectations about the engaged groups' lived experiences. It is particularly important here to determine requirements through co-creative processes with communities, to ensure the science communication intervention is desired and relevant to them [Feliú-Mójer, 2020; Pandya et al., 2025].

These deficit-oriented approaches risk becoming a normative imposition. When inclusion is pursued without invitation, consultation, or co-creation, it can violate community autonomy and reinforce asymmetrical power relations through subtle microaggressions of exclusion [Dawson, 2019; Smith et al., 2011]. Engagement is no longer a dialogical process of mutual respect, as described by Canfield et al. [2020], the CPAS Inclusive Science Communication Collective [2025], Feliú-Mójer [2020], or Pandya et al. [2025], but a symbolic act of reaching out, framed by the academic habitus and epistemologies of the communicating institution. It assumes that what science has to offer is necessarily beneficial and that resistance or indifference must be addressed through better messaging, improved access, or more appealing formats.

Yet from the perspective of academic saviourism, such resistance from marginalised communities may not be a sign of failure, but a legitimate response to epistemic overreach. It may reflect a fatigue of constantly trying to adapt to places of not belonging, a preference for different forms of knowledge, a critique of institutional authority, and systemic exclusion, or a desire to avoid symbolic instrumentalisation [Dawson, 2019; Pino, 2023; Smith et al., 2011]. The insistence on inclusion when framed as a moral imperative can obscure these dynamics and reframe disengagement as a problem to be solved rather than a position to be understood.

Even as science communication transitions toward more participatory, reflexive, and justice-oriented models, the concept of academic saviourism offers a critical analytical lens to assess where such transitions succeed and where they risk reproducing existing hierarchies under new labels. The concept of academic saviourism leads to useful critiques about not only what science communication does, but also how it conceives its societal role. It challenges assumptions that science is neutral and universally relevant and problematises how inclusion is sometimes used to validate institutional identity without questioning the structural conditions that shape participation. In doing so, it aligns with current attempts at social justice and the decolonisation of science communication and serves as tool for

achieving them more critically. These approaches not only challenge the false binaries of 'science' and 'public', but also starkly recognise science communication as a White, Eurocentristic and heteropatriarchal paradigm that must fundamentally change to become socially just [Finlay et al., 2021; Kankaria & Chakraborty, 2024; Orthia & de Kauwe, 2023].

Such transitions require rethinking whose knowledge counts and how relationships between science and society are structured. They cannot be achieved by updating formats alone or broadening audiences. They require a shift in power, a willingness to embrace discomfort, and an openness to let publics define both the terms and purposes of engagement [Canfield et al., 2020]. As Cole [2012] argues, saviour practices are less about equity than about affirming privilege through emotional gratification. In science communication, too, change begins when that validation is no longer the goal.

8 ▪ Limitations

As stated in the introduction, this paper's primary goal is to name and critically discuss well-meaning, yet exclusionary tendencies in science communication, rather than to provide concrete solutions. In other words: academic saviourism is an attempt to name things for what they are. The conceptual nature of this work means it does not include empirical testing or direct interventions. Nonetheless, by offering a critical vocabulary this paper aims to lay groundwork for more (self-)reflexive and socially just science communication practices.

Thus, future research should investigate how academic saviourism operates in different contexts, and when DEIA becomes symbolic or extractive. This includes analysing engagement projects, funding structures, evaluation criteria, and rethinking how 'impact' can be understood in terms of structural transformation. Importantly, scholarship must explore how marginalised communities can be centred [Feliú-Mójer, 2020; Pandya et al., 2025] within these questions, not as audiences, but as agents shaping formats, framings, and knowledge production.

Finally, the reflections developed in this article are shaped by the author's position within the academic system. As a White, cisgender, and female scholar living in Germany, there are undeniable privileges that inform this standpoint. At the same time, entering academia as a first-generation student from a rural low- income, and working-class background has contributed to an awareness of the symbolic boundaries, implicit codes, and normative expectations that structure access to, and participation in science and science communication. While these reflections emerge from certain marginalised positions, they do not presume to speak for those facing more acute forms of exclusion, nor assert neutrality. Rather, they are informed by a perspective that is attentive to the ambivalences of institutional inclusion. This also includes the recognition that the author is not exempt from the dynamics of academic saviourism. Despite critical awareness, one's own engagement can reproduce the very patterns identified as problematic. This article's critique is therefore not directed solely outward but includes a self-reflexive element.

9 ▪ Conclusion

Academic saviourism builds on critiques of the WSIC [e.g. Cole, 2012] and draws from academic habitus [Bourdieu, 1987] and science capital [Archer et al., 2015] to offer a novel,

sensitizing concept [Blumer, 1954] for examining how dominant actors in science communication seek to 'help' marginalised individuals through inclusion in science — but only within established frameworks and hierarchies. Characterised by assumptions that science is inherently good, historically neutral, and universally beneficial, and that exclusion is simply a problem of access, these approaches fail to address deeper institutional logics defining legitimate knowledge, thereby sustaining institutional power while appearing progressive [Dawson, 2019; Pino, 2023; Weingart & Joubert, 2019].

This article has traced three core manifestations of academic saviourism. First, it places affective burdens on those it seeks to include, requiring them to adapt to spaces not designed for them while enduring subtle exclusion mechanisms [Dawson, 2019; Humm et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2011]. Second, it encourages performative inclusion where individuals are made visible through numbers but rarely given power to define engagement terms [Canfield et al., 2020; Feliú-Mójer, 2020; Pino, 2023]. Third, it results in normative assumptions about marginalised communities through deficit-oriented framing while maintaining exclusionary practices [Armstrong & Lock, 2023; Finlay et al., 2021; Weingart & Joubert, 2019; Pino, 2023].

The concept of academic saviourism is not intended to reject DEIA altogether but to interrogate the forms it takes and the power dynamics it embeds. In the context of ongoing transitions in science communication — from deficit to dialogue, from top-down to participatory, from expert-driven to co-created models — academic saviourism serves as an analytical lens to evaluate whether these transitions are genuine or merely symbolic. As public engagement becomes a normative expectation, frequently reinforced by funding mechanisms and institutional strategies, it is increasingly vital to ask: Who defines the terms of inclusion? Who ultimately benefits from it? And whose knowledge and values are being centred?

Addressing academic saviourism means shifting from an instrumental logic of outreach to a reflexive, relational, and justice-oriented practice. It requires science communicators and institutions to decentre themselves and to build long-term, reciprocal relationships that acknowledge historical injustices, resist essentialist representations, and redistribute epistemic authority [CPAS Inclusive Science Communication Collective, 2025; Canfield et al., 2020; Feliú-Mójer, 2020; Humm & Schrögel, 2020; Pandya et al., 2025]. DEIA should not be understood as a standalone gesture in science communication, but as part of a larger, overarching transformation towards social justice. As Cole [2012] observes, the task is not simply to invite more people into existing structures but to interrogate how these structures are built, who controls them, and what values they sustain.

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