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COMMENT

Scientists under fire: lessons from the Omicron case

Commentary on

Scholars under attack — Navigating the dark side of public engagement and science communication in a politicised (online) environment

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Abstract

Scientists face growing pressure to share their research with the public — an ethical and professional duty that can sometimes lead to public hostility when addressing sensitive, controversial, or unpopular topics. Negative reactions from society, often worsened by social media, threaten not only the scientists themselves but also public trust in science and the integrity of knowledge systems. This commentary presents a case study of two scientists based in southern Africa, Professor Tulio de Oliveira and Professor Sikhulile Moyo, who identified the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) in November 2021. After sharing their findings with the relevant authorities, they encountered a wave of public criticism and abuse. Using insights from interviews with these scientists, we examine the different forms of this abuse, its impact, and the coping strategies they employed. We highlight the broader lessons this case offers for contemporary science communication, arguing that protecting scientists who face public backlash when sharing their research is essential for safeguarding science as a whole. We also suggest ways individuals, institutions, and the scientific community can create more supportive research environments for scientists working on potentially sensitive political or social issues.

Keywords

Science communication in the developing world; Public engagement with science and technology

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1 ▪ Introduction: the dark side of the public spotlight

Effective communication is becoming an increasingly essential skill for scientists as research funding becomes more scarce and misinformation more widespread. Additionally, engaging with the public, policymakers, and the media is often required by funders and research institutions in grants and employment contracts [Murunga et al., 2024]. However, as the boundaries between science, society, and politics become ever more blurred, the risks associated with public visibility have grown significantly [Kupper et al., 2021]. Scientists who prioritise open and proactive communication about their work may face various negative responses, from insults and dismissive remarks to organised harassment, damage to reputation, legal threats, and even physical dangers [Valiverronen & Saikkonen, 2021; O'Grady, 2022]. Concerns about the perils of public visibility in science were prominent during COVID-19, when many scientists who spoke publicly about the pandemic faced abuse in the form of personal attacks, trolling, and even death threats [Li et al., 2024]. This kind of online incivility has detrimental consequences for affected scientists, but also negatively affects public perceptions of scientists, undermines public trust in science, and impedes constructive dialogue between science and society [Egelhofer et al., 2024; Peters, 2024].

This commentary examines the risks that public exposure poses to scientists through a case study of two researchers based in southern Africa, Professor Tulio de Oliveira and Professor Sikhulile Moyo. After announcing their discovery of the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) in November 2021, they were subjected to intense scrutiny and became targets of misplaced public blame. Their lived experiences provide a sobering example of how well-intended public announcements about science can have unintended and far-reaching consequences.

The Omicron case highlights the complex links and intricate relationships between science, politics, the media, and society in a diverse and digital world. It illustrates how geopolitical power dynamics and historical inequalities shape global perspectives and responses to new scientific discoveries. It also demonstrates how scientists who share potentially sensitive or unpopular findings are at risk, underscoring the need for institutional guidelines and strategies to protect those speaking out in the public interest.

Drawing on online interviews conducted with de Oliveira on March 28, and Moyo on April 8, 2025, we examine the factors that influenced the hostility they encountered, as well as its personal and professional impacts. We also consider the lessons learned about how scientists can anticipate and handle public hostility, as well as how institutions and professional networks could support and protect them.

2 ▪ The Omicron story: science, crisis, and visibility

The year 2021 was a uniquely significant time in the history of science as scientists worldwide mobilised at unprecedented speed to understand the SARS-CoV-2 virus, track its evolution, and inform public health responses [Williams et al., 2023]. The COVID-19 pandemic also revealed the dangers of misinformation shared by the public, resulting in an infodemic that fuelled distrust, polarisation, and hostility [Patwa et al., 2021]. Scientists found themselves not only fighting to control the pandemic but also battling a so-called 'infodemic' — a task that exposed many of them to varying degrees of public abuse [O'Grady, 2022]. In this highly charged environment, Tulio de Oliveira, Director of the Centre for

Epidemic Response and Innovation at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, and Sikhulile Moyo, Laboratory Director at the Botswana Harvard Health Partnership in Botswana, identified a new, highly mutated variant of SARS-CoV-2 in November 2021. Initially working independently, but later in close communication, their teams quickly sequenced and analysed viral samples, alerting national health authorities, the World Health Organisation (WHO), the international scientific community, and the media — all within three days.

On November 22, 2021, South Africa's Network for Genomic Surveillance identified highly divergent genomes from Gauteng province. De Oliveira quickly obtained 100 additional samples. His team sequenced these samples within 24 hours, confirming that a new lineage was spreading widely (T. de Oliveira, interview, March 28, 2025). He promptly notified the South African Director-General of Health and scheduled a briefing with President Cyril Ramaphosa. By November 25, 2021, the results were shared with the South African government, and the scientists were authorised to share their findings publicly.

Meanwhile, Moyo's team in Botswana also identified unusual sequences and alerted the Botswana Ministry of Health. They uploaded their data to the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID), an international open-access genomic database, making the sequences immediately available to researchers worldwide (S. Moyo, interview, April 8, 2025). The next day, November 26, 2021, the WHO designated the new lineage as a variant of concern and named it Omicron.

Nowadays, transparency is increasingly seen as a cornerstone of effective science communication. Disclosing the scientific method — including associated uncertainties — can foster "warranted epistemic trust" rather than blind deference. Transparency helps audiences judge the *process* of science rather than just its outcomes, which strengthens both accountability and long-term trust [Intemann, 2024]. However, this approach is not without risk. Transparency can also be misunderstood or misinterpreted by non-experts, or confuse or overwhelm them, resulting in diluted messaging and diminished perceived objectivity or credibility [Metzen, 2025]. In essence, transparency can build trust and facilitate informed public engagement, but also requires care to avoid confusion, misinterpretation, or erosion of trust.

As such, De Oliveira and Moyo's efficiency and transparency embodied the principle of beneficence, showing a commitment to global health, but unfortunately received mixed reactions. Some praised them for their swift disclosure and scientific responsibility [Agence France-Presse, 2021], while others criticised them. *"Someone said, 'You scientists and your big mouths — you are destroying our businesses"* (S. Moyo, interview, April 8, 2025). The ethical tension between doing good for humanity and protecting local interests became stark. International media outlets labelled Omicron the "African variant," and governments — starting with Israel and quickly followed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the European Union, Morocco, Malaysia, Japan, and the U.S.A. — imposed travel bans on several African countries, including some where Omicron had not yet been detected. This caused further harm to fragile economies and triggered widespread diplomatic fallout [Association for Progressive Communications, 2021; Harding, 2022]. This also raised a moral paradox where those who upheld global ethical norms of openness and beneficence were penalised for their integrity. A cartoon published in the Spanish newspaper *La Tribuna de Albacete* on November 28, 2021, characterised Omicron as black figures in a crowded boat, bringing the virus from South Africa to Europe, which further underscores the ethical implications of inequitable representation and stigmatisation.

The South African government responded by saying, “Excellent science should be applauded and not punished” [Department of International Relations & Cooperation, 2021], while Botswana’s health minister emphasised that origin mattered less than timely detection and transparency [Dikoloti in Dube, 2021]. Still, these statements were insufficient to undo the damage caused by the renewed lockdowns and travel bans imposed on South Africa and other parts of the continent.

To understand the anger and frustration directed at the scientists who announced Omicron, it is helpful to recall that by the end of 2021, people were weary of the strict COVID-19 regulations in some countries, especially South Africa. At that time, many were hopeful that some restrictions would be lifted in time for the South African summer holiday season (December to January), which would allow hotels, restaurants, and other tourism-related businesses to operate as before. When the Omicron announcement was made at the end of November 2021, its timing and consequences could hardly have been worse.

3 ▪ Visibility and vulnerability: scientists in the public eye

In their communication about Omicron, de Oliveira and Moyo acted responsibly by sharing critical findings with authorities and the public without delay, thereby upholding autonomy both personally and professionally [Kelly, 2020; Brownell et al., 2013]. However, this came at a significant personal cost as both scientists faced considerable public hostility and harassment. For example, social media posts on X showed that de Oliveira received a flood of insults, accusations, and threats, with many people questioning his motives and blaming him personally for renewed pandemic-related restrictions (T. de Oliveira, interview, March 28, 2025). Moyo recalled how British media speculation that Omicron had emerged from an HIV-positive patient in Botswana — and was therefore a “Botswana Ninja Virus” — created panic and stigma, causing tensions with his government (S. Moyo, interview, April 8, 2025). The scientists’ families were also affected, experiencing anxiety and concern for their safety. Both scientists reported reputational attacks aimed at undermining their credibility and questioning their competence. In an environment filled with misinformation, their findings were politicised and distorted by actors with various ideological, economic, and political agendas. Even as some supporters praised their transparency, others argued they should have remained silent, highlighting the dilemma scientists face when communicating controversial findings. Much of the backlash de Oliveira and Moyo faced supports existing claims that public hostility toward scientists often aims to undermine their authority as public experts by targeting their credibility and trustworthiness. Hostile comments on social media lower perceived integrity and cast doubt on scientific claims [Gierth & Bromme, 2020]. In addition, political attacks and broader rhetorical frames like the “war on science” portray science as exclusive, contributing to polarised perceptions of its credibility and influencing anti-elitists to distrust scientific information and support critics [Hardy et al., 2019; Egelhofer, 2023].

Their previous experience in public engagement highlighted the importance of anticipating risks and developing mitigation strategies [Tollefson, 2024]. De Oliveira, who was experienced in communicating sensitive scientific findings from his earlier genomic surveillance work, anticipated backlash and its potential effects. Moyo — less experienced in public engagement — was caught off guard: *“We didn’t realise it was going to be this huge. We are doing the science. We don’t know the impact”* (S. Moyo, interview, April 8, 2025). This

difference in occupational background affected how they each experienced and handled the hostility, with de Oliveira being in a better position to cope.

4 ▪ Preparing to cope with public hostility

De Oliveira and Moyo's experiences demonstrate strategies that others can adopt to address hostility in the future. These strategies are effective at both the individual and collective levels, emphasising the importance of preparation, solidarity, and mutual support.

4.1 ▪ *Anticipation and preparation*

One of the main differences between the two scientists' experiences as reported in their interviews was their level of preparedness. Due to his extensive background in genomic surveillance and public engagement, de Oliveira suggested that he understood the risks, anticipated the adverse outcomes, and actively discussed potential responses with government officials before going public. This knowledge helped him get ready for what lay ahead. He managed to temper expectations and concentrate on his work despite the negative public reactions (T. de Oliveira, interview, March 28, 2025). Moyo, in comparison, shared that he was unprepared for the scale, intensity, and aggression of the backlash. *"There are so many things I would do differently now,"* he reflected (S. Moyo, interview, April 8, 2025). He said that in the future, he would be proactive instead of reactive with regard to media interactions, and that learning how to communicate effectively was now a critical goal he had set for himself.

This is a clear example of "forewarned is forearmed," where anticipating backlash helps scientists and their institutions plan their communication strategies and set up support systems [Tollefson, 2024]. Training in public engagement, crisis communication, and risk management can equip scientists with vital skills to effectively address public concerns and hostility.

4.2 ▪ *Support networks*

Both de Oliveira and Moyo highlighted the intrinsic value of teamwork, collaboration and solidarity. The speed at which they co-authored a journal article on Omicron directly after the WHO announcement demonstrated a united front that tempered criticism and strengthened their credibility (S. Moyo, interview, April 8, 2025).

Support from peers, global health authorities, and governments also played a crucial role in backing the two scientists, reflecting a collective commitment to promote the well-being of both the scientific community and the global public. For instance, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken publicly commended South Africa's scientists for their transparency, reinforcing the ethical and professional legitimacy of their actions [Agence France-Presse, 2021]. Peer and institutional backing not only strengthen scientists' resilience against personal and professional attacks but also send a message to opponents that scientists are not isolated targets [Nölleke et al., 2023]. Visible support from the scientific community in various forms can significantly alter how scientists perceive public backlash, transforming acts of individual moral courage into expressions of shared ethical responsibility.

4.3 ▪ *A sense of purpose*

Despite experiencing occasional harassment, many scientists say that their sense of duty to the public motivates them to keep going and communicate openly about their findings [Schøning et al., 2025]. The same applied to de Oliveira and Moyo. Their professionalism and dedication to transparency and public health guide their actions, even amid global alarm and hostility. *"We had to work and focus continuously,"* de Oliveira recalled, emphasising the scientists' mission to stay focused. *"We know that despite all — we can feel threatened, we can feel intimidated, we can feel scared — but we know that early identification of pathogens saves hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives worldwide."* (T. de Oliveira, interview, March 28, 2025). This aligns with findings from Nölleke et al. [2023], who reported that Austrian scientists continued to engage with various members of the public despite abuse, because their sense of responsibility outweighed their negative experiences. It confirms that scientists' sense of purpose and commitment to a cause can lessen the discouraging effects of public hostility.

5 ▪ Institutional support: enabling safe environments

Literature highlights that research institutions have a responsibility to protect scientists who engage in public facing communication, especially when that communication leads to harassment, public backlash, and risk. This became evident in the case of microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles, who successfully sued the University of Auckland for failing to adequately protect and support her when she faced public hostility during the COVID-19 pandemic [Nogrady, 2024]. Wiles's case underscores the responsibility that universities and research institutions have to enable safe environments and implement safeguards for researchers.

5.1 ▪ *Legal and policy support*

While preserving academic freedom and affirming scientists' rights to share their research widely, publicly-funded research institutions have an ethical obligation rooted in justice and accountability to the public. This is mainly because most institutions are funded by public money. They should establish clear guidelines to guide and protect scientists. They must ensure equitable access to personal safety regardless of the scientist's career stage and ensure that legal protections and policies are in place to address hostility in any form. This should include clear reporting procedures, timely and adequate security measures, legal support, and coordination with law enforcement where necessary, ensuring that institutions take responsibility for safeguarding the well-being of their employees.

5.2 ▪ *Counselling and training*

Counselling services, security assessments, and crisis communication teams can assist scientists in managing risks to their personal and professional safety. Institutions should offer training in communication, media engagement, and digital security to equip scientists with vital skills and tools for conducting public engagement safely and effectively. This includes developing a risk communication strategy to help them identify, anticipate, and respond to communication-related risks effectively.

5.3 ▪ *Advocacy and solidarity*

The institutional voice is more influential than that of individual scientists. Therefore, institutions have an ethical obligation to contribute to shaping public discourse. Strong and open defence of scientists under attack sends a clear message that scientific integrity is non-negotiable and harassment will not be accepted. Institutions should also reach outside their own circles, working with others to fight dis- and misinformation, boost science literacy, and foster respectful science-society relationships.

In the Omicron case, supportive public statements by the governments of South Africa and Botswana helped strengthen the position of scientists. Also, both governments' condemnation of discriminatory and punitive travel bans played a key role in reshaping public perceptions and shifting the conversation [Department of International Relations & Cooperation, 2021]. Such advocacy and visible, high-level public support are especially important for scientists in Africa, who face disproportionate scrutiny and bias rooted in past and present practices [Joubert, 2018].

6 ▪ Key takeaways

The Omicron case, although grounded in a specific context and moment in time, still offers relevant insights that may inform related settings by providing guidance for all stakeholders in the increasingly complex practice of public engagement with science.

1. Visibility carries risk, but silence is even more dangerous. Publicly visible scientists might encounter public hostility, but censoring critical information — whether externally or self-imposed — can lead to even more serious consequences e.g. erosion of trust, amplification of misinformation, and compromised ability to make informed decisions. In other words, perceived suppression of scientific evidence can intensify polarisation and mistrust, ultimately leading to poorer public health, environmental, and policy outcomes [Oreskes & Conway, 2022; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; van der Linden, 2022]. The challenge is to balance risk management with maintaining truth and staying engaged with the public.

2. Preparation is key. Clear protocols, focused training, and experienced support teams are essential parts of preparedness. Anticipating hostility and preparing for backlash allows scientists and institutions to develop strategic responses calmly and methodically in advance, helping to reduce potential harm.

3. Support must be holistic. While individual resilience is important, it is not enough. Institutional policies should be collaborative and include legal and other protections. State, institutional, and public advocacy are all necessary to safeguard both scientists and academic freedom.

4. Cultural contexts influence negative attitudes and action. As the Omicron announcement clearly demonstrated, hostility toward scientists is shaped by historical, political, cultural, and geographical factors. Efforts to address public backlash must also consider these broader contexts, including the inequalities faced by scientists from the global south.

5. Public backlash threatens science itself. Specifically, public hostility compromises the process and practice of producing reliable knowledge about the world — not just the facts or

findings that result from it. Witnessing science-society conflicts can discourage new scientists from sharing their work. Public backlash also harms individuals, erodes trust in science (due to heightened visibility of scientific disagreement and debate, which leads to increased public uncertainty), disrupts research plans, and complicates the delivery of important messages.

7 ▪ Conclusion: towards a more functional science-society contract

The Omicron announcement, illustrated through the experiences of Tulio de Olivera and Sikhulile Moyo, exemplifies the promise and peril of science in the public sphere. These scientists did not hesitate to fulfil their professional duties during a difficult time. Yet, they were exposed to hostility, marginalisation, and politicisation. Their experience demonstrates how quickly and easily scientists can become embroiled in conflict with society.

In a world where science is becoming more politicised, scientists facing criticism are no longer rare. Hostility directed at scientists often reflects broader issues of mistrust, polarisation, and inequalities within science itself. These are larger problems that cannot be solved by scientists alone, especially since they often face public hostility. Systemic solutions, such as institutional support, legal protections, strong research ecosystems, and a renewed commitment to democratizing science, are necessary.

For science communication scholars and practitioners, the Omicron case reminds us that public engagement is not just about informing and being informed. It is about intentionally navigating complex spaces where knowledge, power, and identity clash. It requires us to rethink how we prepare scientists for the public stage, how we support them, and how we create better platforms for free but respectful conversations between science and the public.

De Oliveria and Moyo's combined experience shows us that the risks of going public are real and constant. However, as the world faces increasingly complex challenges, silence enforced through intimidation is no longer acceptable. Protecting scientists under attack is crucial for maintaining evidence-based decisions, ensuring public safety, and supporting the integrity and progress of science.

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