A JOURNAL BY SISSA MEDIALAB

ARTICLE

Making science part of 'The Conversation' — benefits and barriers experienced by researchers as authors writing for The Conversation Africa

Lili Rademan, Marina Joubert and Lars Guenther

Abstract

As an online platform for scientists to share their expertise with diverse audiences within a journalistic context, *The Conversation* provides a novel link between science and society. This study examines the benefits and barriers experienced by researchers who write for the African edition of this platform. We analysed 3560 author profiles, 5392 articles, and conducted 21 interviews with authors. We found that authors were motivated mainly by moral duty but also wanted to enhance the policy impact of their work. Becoming an author was perceived as beneficial for visibility, networking, and career development. Key barriers included time constraints, concerns about oversimplification, and a lack of institutional rewards. Authors valued the editorial process that allowed them to initiate an article and control the final version before publication. The study contributes to understanding how researchers experience and engage with novel science communication platforms.

Keywords

Science and media; Digital science communication; Science writing

Received: 2nd February 2026
Accepted: 23rd May 2026
Published: 19th August 2026

1 ▪ Introduction

In the wake of the challenges presented by pandemics, climate change, and other societal issues rooted in science, calls are increasing for scientists to engage with diverse segments of society [Calice et al., 2022; Cologna et al., 2021], particularly in digital landscapes where expert voices are essential to counter mis- and disinformation. However, a complex set of personal and institutional factors, along with social and scientific norms, influences the nature and extent of scientists' public engagement behaviour [Borlaug et al., 2024]. It is, therefore, vital to understand personal motivations, as well as broader career-related, institutional, and societal contexts that can either facilitate or hinder such engagement [Fecher & Hebing, 2021; Singh et al., 2019].

Over time, scientists' participation in public engagement about their work may change in response to evolving institutional contexts and new platforms that allow them to make their work visible in novel ways. With this in mind, this article focuses on *The Conversation Africa* (*TC Africa*) as an example of a novel public engagement platform [Guenther & Joubert, 2021] and seeks to understand the factors that motivate scientists to write for this platform or deter them from doing so. We argue that writing for *TC Africa* constitutes a form of public engagement behaviour and that this study is especially relevant in the African context, where public engagement opportunities and related funding sources are scarce, and opportunities for scientists to engage with specialist science writers and editors are limited [Riley et al., 2022].

Research consistently shows that science journalism occupies a low-status position in African newsrooms, where political and economic news receive priority and science reporting is under-resourced [Claassen, 2011; Guenther et al., 2019; Nguyen & Tran, 2019]. Matsilele et al. [2025] link this to limited resources, insufficient expertise, and competing newsroom priorities, and Nguyen and Tran [2019] identify the marginalisation of science news as a broader pattern in the developing world. Together, these studies highlight the systematic undervaluation of science journalism in Africa. This trend is also related to the digital news media ecology and economic pressures, where the loss of advertising and audience revenues has changed newsrooms, with specialised news beats such as the science beat being downsized or abolished, and hybrid publication models such as *TC Africa* having started to blur the traditional boundaries between science and journalism [Heyl et al., 2020; Guenther & Joubert, 2021].

Against this backdrop of limited public engagement opportunities and the marginal status of science journalism, *TC Africa* represents a platform with potential to amplify the visibility of African research and its authors. Thus, in this paper, we aim to report on the characteristics of *TC Africa* authors and present findings based on 21 interviews we conducted with authors who count as either prolific or limited[1] in writing for the platform.

1.1 ▪ *The Conversation as a public engagement platform*

Launched in Australia in 2011, *The Conversation* has since expanded into a global network, with national and regional editions established over time in the United Kingdom (2013), the

1. 'Limited' is used here purely as a descriptive term indicating authors with fewer publications at *TC Africa* within the study period. This does not imply a value judgment about the quality or importance of their work.

United States (2014), Africa and France (2015), Canada, Indonesia and New Zealand (2017), Spain (2018), and more recently Brazil and Europe (2023). *TC Africa*, focused on news and authors from the African continent, was launched in May 2015 [The Conversation, 2020]. By 2022, it was headquartered in Johannesburg (South Africa), with editorial offices in Nairobi (Kenya), Accra (Ghana), and Lagos (Nigeria), and an editor based in Dakar (Senegal) in collaboration with the French edition. *The Conversation* constitutes a novel form of hybrid science journalism on a public digital media platform, in which articles are written by scientists who collaborate with experienced editors to co-produce the final text. As such, the platform is described as a bridge between science and journalism — an amalgamation of scientific communication, science journalism, and public science communication [Appel & Falgas, 2019; Guenther & Joubert, 2021]. On the one hand, *The Conversation* resembles a traditional media organisation with qualified journalists, editors, and news categories. On the other hand, it draws from a large community of academics who freely share their research outputs to amplify their public engagement and impact on public debate [Osman & Cunningham, 2020].

Some scholars define *The Conversation* as a complex peripheral actor because it operates across multiple domains of the journalistic process, including production, publication, and dissemination, while remaining outside the traditional professional boundaries of journalism [Hermida & Young, 2019]. At the production level, it depends on the free labour of academics who pitch and write stories for the platform. In terms of publication, it is funded largely by the higher education sector while remaining editorially independent. It disseminates content for free, which is republished by mainstream legacy media and other peripheral actors in the mass media ecosystem. This model is based on the premise of turning the university sector into a "giant newsroom" by encouraging scholars to take on journalistic roles to provide high-quality information free from commercial or political bias [Hermida et al., 2022, p. 59].

The researchers who write for *The Conversation* are described as "journalistic strangers" [Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018, p. 70] or as amateur journalists who adopt professional journalistic practices [Ginosar et al., 2024]. They are even typified as explicit interlopers who "may not necessarily be welcomed or defined as journalists and work on the periphery of the profession while directly contributing content or products to the creation and distribution of news" [Eldridge II, 2019]. Consequently, established media initially greeted the platform's launch with institutional wariness, questioning its editorial independence given its close ties to university funding [Hermida et al., 2022].

Blanchett et al. [2025, p. 25] report on an editor who describes the relationship between scientists and journalists who collaborate in writing for *The Conversation* as a "peanut butter and chocolate mix", where journalists are the "guardians of standards" (peanut butter) and academics are the "guardians of knowledge" (chocolate), "each keeping their field of expertise within the partnership". Bartleman et al. [2024] argue that *The Conversation* is a reciprocal hybrid characterised by ongoing collaboration between scientists and journalists who share an end goal. Despite these perceptions of *The Conversation* as a peripheral actor and its occasional struggles for legitimacy, scholars recognise that the platform is becoming an integral player as legacy newsrooms shrink and that it is filling a specific gap in science journalism [Hermida & Young, 2019].

All articles published on *The Conversation* are freely available for reading, as well as for republishing by other media outlets [Osman & Cunningham, 2019]. Furthermore, the

platform is directly linked to social media platforms to enable easy sharing of articles, allowing it to play a role as an intermedia agenda-setter for journalistic and social media [Guenther & Joubert, 2021; Riedlinger et al., 2021]. This is why *The Conversation* is categorised as an amplifier platform. Amplifying alludes to the platform's ability to enhance scientists' engagement and impact on an audience beyond academia by offering a more direct and collaborative route to publication than traditional media [Osman & Cunningham, 2019, 2020]. Since articles on *The Conversation* include hyperlinks to academic articles, this can increase citations of these articles [Fleerackers et al., 2024] and may help increase research uptake in policy circles [Zardo et al., 2018].

The Conversation invites scientists to pitch stories, allowing them to initiate media exposure and act as agenda-setters, while also giving them the final say before an article is published. This arrangement departs from the traditional roles of journalists and scientists in the science news cycle, where journalists select stories, act as gatekeepers, and oversee editorial decisions and final checks before publishing [Guenther et al., 2019; Nelkin, 1995; Scheffauer et al., 2024]. However, content published on *The Conversation* is still subject to professional journalistic editing and oversight; behind the scenes, the editors may edit and even rewrite the copy provided by scientists [Guenther & Joubert, 2021], an editorial process that could also highlight conflicting professional norms and result in some tensions [Dempster et al., 2022]. Such tensions may arise, for instance, when scientists resist edits that they perceive as oversimplifying their findings, or when journalists prioritise accessibility and newsworthiness over the precision and nuance scientists are trained to uphold [Dunwoody et al., 2009]. In some cases, journalists working at *The Conversation* even reject articles proposed to or written for them.

Due to the business model adopted by *The Conversation* (content created by researchers, funded by research institutions, and freely republished in the media), this platform can be seen as a 'saviour' of science media coverage, enabling media outlets to access quality content at no cost. However, it also threatens the independence of science journalism, as free content leaves fewer job opportunities for science journalists. As science communication becomes increasingly institutionalised, it shapes the media coverage of science [Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2018]. This institutionalisation is visible in universities and non-university research centres, which have increasingly invested in dedicated science communication offices and professional communicators tasked with managing and amplifying their research outputs [Entradas, 2022]. From this, so-called copy-and-paste journalism, or 'churnalism', where media outlets re-use institutional press releases with little or no journalistic oversight, is on the rise [Guenther et al., 2024; Heyl et al., 2020]. Arguably, *The Conversation* is a special case, since research-active experts rather than institutional communicators provide the science content.

Nevertheless, limited research exists on amplifier platforms such as *The Conversation* in the global south. Most current studies focus on the experiences of researchers in the global north who have interacted with this platform [e.g., Heyl et al., 2020; Fleerackers et al., 2024; Riedlinger et al., 2021], with limited attention to the African edition. Zardo et al. [2018] shed light on how the Australian platform achieves impact through readers using the information to advise and further develop policies and programs. Osman and Cunningham [2020] demonstrated that Australian researchers see advantages in engaging with the platform and are primarily driven by ethical motivations. Young and Hermida [2020] showed how the Canadian edition of this platform contributes to making research more accessible to

non-academic audiences. Appel and Falgas [2019] reported the views of scientists and journalists regarding the French edition. They found that some scientists were critical because they thought some authors only published for personal gain. At the same time, these French scientists feared professional penalisation for partaking in science popularisation. On the other hand, French journalists found working for *The Conversation* (as part of its editorial team) more meaningful than their earlier experiences working for traditional media outlets.

In its 10-year review, *TC Africa* reports substantial growth and reach: over the period, the platform published 11,775 articles authored by 7,540 academics from across the continent. These pieces have collectively garnered more than 180 million reads, and approximately 935 media outlets have republished the content, extending its circulation well beyond the platform itself [Bailey et al., 2025], providing evidence of its impact as an amplifier platform. *TC Africa*'s reach also extends beyond the continent, as articles are shared across *The Conversation*'s global network, amplifying the voices of African researchers to international audiences [Bailey et al., 2025]. In its first five years, authors from South Africa dominated *TC Africa* [Guenther & Joubert, 2021], but the 10-year review shows author numbers from other countries are increasing [Bailey et al., 2025]. Thus, *TC Africa* is highly suitable to analyse scientists' public communication behaviour on novel platforms.

1.2 ▪ *Scientists' public communication behaviour*

Scientists' intentions and willingness to engage in public science communication are governed by a complex and dynamic set of factors and norms [Calice et al., 2022]. Theories and research insights from the fields of psychology and sociology help us to understand why scientists embrace or avoid public engagement [Poliakoff & Webb, 2007] based on theories about individual behaviour (typically rooted in social psychology), as well as theories relevant to scientists' social contexts (typically based in sociology) [Besley et al., 2018; Besley, Garlick et al., 2021; Besley, Newman et al., 2021].

The most popular behavioural theory applied to understanding scientists' public engagement behaviour is the theory of planned behaviour [Ajzen, 1991], with amendments suggested by Poliakoff and Webb [2007] and Dudo [2013] to increase its relevance to scientists and their engagement with society. Moreover, social cognitive theory [Bandura, 1986] and the social nature of communication [Riley & Riley, 1959] are useful in placing public communication of science within society and understanding how social influences shape scientists' engagement attitudes and behaviour. Lastly, theories concerning the normative nature of science by Merton [1942, 1968, 1973] are relevant because they speak directly to scientists' professional motivations and behaviours. Collectively, studies employing these theories have shed light on scientists' attitudes and motivations (both intrinsic and extrinsic) regarding public engagement. Below, we discuss the factors influencing scientists' engagement behaviour relevant to the current study.

1.3 ▪ *Demographics — the effect of gender, population group, and research field*

Research findings about the influence of a scientist's gender[2] on their public science communication involvement are inconclusive [Anzivino, 2021], with some studies concluding

2. Gender is different than the biological sex; however, research usually refers to male and female as categories. Thus, the present paper also has to refer to these two categories and will so throughout the article.

that male scientists are more engaged with the public compared to their female colleagues [Crettaz von Roten, 2011; Lawson & Salter, 2023], while others find that female researchers take the lead in public engagement and outreach activities [Ecklund et al., 2012; Lawson & Salter, 2023]. It is clear, however, that men and women face different normative influences, expectations, and barriers that shape their involvement [Crettaz von Roten & Goastellec, 2015; Jarvis et al., 2022] and that they have different objectives and perceive different rewards when they engage with the public. For example, female scientists may be motivated to attract young women to science and may experience pressure to act as role models [Johnson et al., 2014; Phillips et al., 2022; Hamlyn et al., 2015]. By contrast, men are especially in demand as media sources [Joubert et al., 2022; Torres-Albero et al., 2011]. Public outreach work is sometimes perceived as a stigmatised task routinely delegated to women [Johnson et al., 2014; Lawson & Salter, 2023], and there are concerns that public engagement could hinder the academic progress of female scientists [Ecklund et al., 2012; Püttmann et al., 2023].

Science communication literature generally neglects to consider population groups as one of the background factors that could influence a scientist's public communication behaviour, but this could be a relevant factor in the South African context [Joubert, 2018]. The country has a history of excluding a large part of its population from science and, consequently, a perceived need to correct past imbalances via increased visibility of black researchers as opinion leaders and public intellectuals [Joubert & Mkansi, 2020]. Joubert [2018] found that black scientists were perceived as better placed to connect with key audiences for science in South Africa. This was linked to cultural resonance and the ability to engage in indigenous languages. Furthermore, black scientists were mainly motivated to serve as role models and inspire young people to pursue science careers.

As far as research field is concerned, researchers in the arts, humanities, and social sciences are more active in public communication and media engagement compared to those in the natural and physical sciences, mathematics, and engineering, with exceptions in fields such as astronomy and climate science [Besley et al., 2018; Besley, Garlick et al., 2021; Besley, Newman et al., 2021; Entradas et al., 2019; Entradas & Bauer, 2019; Hamlyn et al., 2015]. Disciplines also shape the type of communication activities in which scientists participate. Natural scientists are especially active in educational activities at schools and public events, while social scientists prefer media interactions, public speeches, and civic-related activities [Entradas et al., 2020; Torres-Albero et al., 2011]. Differences in disciplinary norms — generally stricter in the natural sciences than social sciences — may explain some of these variations [Johnson et al., 2014]. While some disciplines display a strong sense of duty to go public [Marcinkowski et al., 2014], others adhere to traditional norms and harbour a cultural bias against public engagement, actively discouraging such activities [Calice et al., 2022]. In general, it has been shown that social scientists are less constrained in their public dissemination activities when compared to their counterparts in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, and it is comparatively easier for scholars in social sciences and humanities to play by the rules of the media to become public experts and opinion leaders [Entradas et al., 2020; Peters, 2013]. In addition, more social scientists, compared to natural scientists, think that media coverage is valuable and may enhance their careers [Rainie et al., 2015]. While earlier studies have primarily described these patterns as demand-driven, i.e., shaped by journalists' increased interest in social scientists over time [Albæk et al., 2003], our study presents a different dynamic. *TC Africa* is a supply-driven

platform where academics initiate engagement by submitting articles. That social scientists and humanities scholars appear more inclined to contribute in this context suggests that disciplinary norms and motivations continue to shape engagement behaviours even when media interest is not the primary driver.

Based on the literature about the effects of gender, population group, and research field, we ask Research Question 1 (RQ1): What is the distribution of gender, population group, and research field among the scientists writing for *TC Africa*?

1.4 ▪ *Motivations and benefits that drive scientists' public engagement participation*

Scientists' participation in public communication may be linked to democratic or educational objectives [Besley, Garlick et al., 2021; Besley, Newman et al., 2021; Gavhi-Molefe et al., 2021] but could also be driven by personal objectives related to building their profiles and reputations to gain public and policy influence [Entradas et al., 2019; Fahy & Nisbet, 2011; Rose et al., 2020]. Researchers are more receptive to participating in public communication when commitment is visibly demonstrated by top management and reflected in institutional mission statements, policies, reward structures, and incentive schemes, as demonstrated in several studies [Burns et al., 2021; Entradas et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2019]. Scientists communicate more frequently in public if this is a part of their job that is recognised and supported by their institutions, since it provides them with the backing to get involved and the reassurance that these activities are acknowledged and appreciated [Entradas et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2020; Searle, 2012]. In addition to concrete rewards such as funding, collaborators, students and citations, scientists also derive intrinsic (or abstract) rewards from public communication about their work, such as enjoyment, personal development and satisfaction, renewed enthusiasm for research, and feelings of self-esteem from contributing to the public good [Bao et al., 2024; Besley et al., 2018; Dudo & Besley, 2016; Entradas & Bauer, 2019; Rose et al., 2020].

Earlier work on the motivations of researchers who write for *The Conversation* shows that, while amplifying their personal academic brand and reputation matters to some, most academics are motivated by a social role in striving to democratise knowledge and by a sense of civic duty, aiming to counter misinformation and engage the public with evidence-based research [Blanchett et al., 2025]. Studies that have explored authors' attitudes towards writing for *The Conversation* highlight their motivations, struggles with professional identity, and the tangible impacts they experience after publication. Findings indicate that writing for the platform increases an academic's media profile, leading to follow-up interviews, book deals, and high-level invitations to participate in international events [Hermida & Young, 2019].

Based on these findings, we asked Research Question 2 (RQ2): What benefits do authors perceive from writing for *TC Africa*?

1.5 ▪ *The barriers that deter scientists from participating in public engagement*

Many scientists refrain from communicating about their work in the public domain due to several perceived obstacles, risks, and fears [Ecklund et al., 2012; Rose et al., 2020]. Their apprehensions may stem from negative experiences in the past or anxiety about the

anticipated consequences of future participation [Ho et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2014]. Some may avoid media interviews [Driscoll et al., 2021] or fear online engagements [Roedema et al., 2021].

Due to the normative structure of science, public communication is often not recognised as a legitimate scholarly pursuit. Consequently, scientists may be concerned about potentially negative consequences of a high public profile for their careers and may be concerned about disapproval from their colleagues [Chen et al., 2023; Ecklund et al., 2012], linked to the perception that public communication detracts from academic credibility and reputation and that their colleagues may see their public-facing work as self-promotion [Searle, 2012]. They also worry about being accused of oversimplifying science [Dempster et al., 2022] or being accused of bias when they endorse specific policies or advocate for a specific point of view [Cologna et al., 2021; Kotcher et al., 2017].

Also, earlier research has highlighted that writing for *The Conversation* is not without challenges and friction for academics. Authors' concerns are largely centred on the oversimplification of complex content when scientific material is rendered in a journalistic style, and on the perception that this kind of writing is not valued by their institutions and does not count towards career progression [Blanchett et al., 2025].

In light of these barriers, our third research question (RQ3) was: What barriers and risks do authors perceive when writing for *TC Africa*?

1.6 ▪ *Scientists' perceptions of (online) news media and their relationships with journalists*

The traditional view of scientists and journalists is that they often do not get along and that — when they do meet — "the encounters are tense" [Dunwoody & Ryan, 1985]. Conflicting professional norms and dissimilar cultural values are believed to be at the root of this problematic relationship [Kiernan, 1997; Nelkin, 1995]. More recent studies present evidence that scientists interact smoothly and frequently with the mass media and other external audiences [Massarani & Peters, 2016; Peters, 2013; Rose et al., 2020]. Over time, authors have suggested that many scientists are ambivalent about working with the mass media: they recognise the power of the media, but they are also concerned about journalists' objectivity and expertise, and mindful of the potential pitfalls [Dijkstra et al., 2015; Olesk, 2021].

Scientists' views of media engagements as high-risk undertakings are often related to concerns that journalists may distort, sensationalise, or oversimplify their work or that they may be misunderstood, incorrectly quoted or misrepresented in the mass media [Dempster et al., 2022; Lack & Rousseau, 2016]. Such misrepresentations in the media could have long-term consequences for scientists [Dunwoody et al., 2009], causing some scientists to genuinely fear the perceived ability of journalists to damage their academic reputations. Since premature public exposure may diminish scientists' chances of getting new research published, scientists are concerned about the leaking of unpublished research results and are, therefore, apprehensive about the timing of media interactions [Massarani & Peters, 2016; Moorhead et al., 2023]. The question of control over the final version of a media story is usually a persistent source of tension between scientists and journalists [Dempster et al., 2022; Peters et al., 2014]. Most journalists reject the idea that they should consult the scientists they have interviewed before a story goes to print, while scientists typically support

this notion [Massarani & Peters, 2016]. As emphasised earlier, working with journalists at *The Conversation* departs from this standard scenario.

Hence, to understand how authors viewed *TC Africa* and how they experienced working with the platform, we asked three more research questions, namely:

RQ4: How do authors perceive *TC Africa* in terms of its definition and purpose?

RQ5: Do authors see differences between writing for *TC Africa* and engaging directly with mainstream media?

RQ6: How do authors experience their collaboration with the editors at *TC Africa*?

2 ▪ Methodology

Our research project combined a descriptive analysis of author characteristics with in-depth interviews. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee: Social Behavioural and Education Research at Stellenbosch University with Project Number 10572.

2.1 ▪ *Quantitative data collection and analysis*

Our dataset consists of all articles (N = 5392) published over five years since the launch of *TC Africa*, i.e. between 7 May 2015 and 6 May 2020. The data was gathered from the Johannesburg office of *TC Africa* and included information about, among others, publication dates, titles, and authors, including their institutional affiliations and countries. Hence, with a focus on the authors (N = 3560) of these articles rather than the articles themselves, we performed an extensive descriptive analysis of author characteristics, considering country affiliations, institutional affiliations, gender balance, and population group. Using each author's *TC Africa* profile, institutional website, and professional website, one of the authors identified the gender, population group, and main broad research field of each author, coding the latter as one of the following: agricultural sciences, engineering and applied technologies, health sciences, humanities, natural sciences, or social sciences. As this was an inferential process based on visible and textual cues rather than self-identification, this represents a limitation of the study; we were only able to code male and female gender categories, and authors who identify as non-binary may not have been accurately categorised.

2.2 ▪ *Qualitative methodology*

We conducted 21 semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore the views and perceptions of *TC Africa* authors. All interviewees gave informed consent to participate. To ensure that we would gain the perspectives of authors who have written for the platform more and less frequently, the 21 participants were divided into 11 prolific authors (P1–P11) who published more than ten articles at the time and ten limited authors (L1–L10), who published an article 1–4 times (Table 1). Within these criteria, authors were selected to represent, as far as possible, a balance in terms of institutional affiliation, field of research, gender, and population group. Again, gender and population group were inferred from authors' *TC Africa* profiles and institutional/professional websites, including profile photographs, biographical information, and names. The interviews were conducted and recorded by a trained journalist

Table 1. *The Conversation Africa* author interviewees.

ID	*Gender*	*Field*	*Affiliation*	*Country*
P1	Male	Humanities	University of Cape Town	South Africa
P2	Male	Natural sciences	University of the Witwatersrand	South Africa
P3	Male	Social sciences	University of the Witwatersrand	South Africa
P4	Female	Social sciences	University of Johannesburg	South Africa
P5	Male	Social sciences	University of South Africa	South Africa
P6	Female	Natural sciences	University of Illinois	Kenya & USA
P7	Female	Social sciences	University of Johannesburg	South Africa
P8	Male	Social sciences	University of the Witwatersrand	South Africa
P9	Female	Social sciences	Nelson Mandela University	South Africa
P10	Female	Natural sciences	University of Pretoria	South Africa
P11	Male	Natural sciences	University of Johannesburg	South Africa
L1	Male	Health sciences	University of the Western Cape	South Africa
L2	Female	Health sciences	South African Medical Research Council	South Africa
L3	Female	Health sciences	Cape Peninsula University of Technology	South Africa
L4	Female	Social sciences	Rhodes University	South Africa
L5	Male	Health sciences	University of Johannesburg	South Africa
L6	Female	Social sciences	University of KwaZulu-Natal	South Africa
L7	Female	Social sciences	Rhodes University	South Africa
L8	Female	Social sciences	University of the Western Cape	South Africa
L9	Female	Social sciences	North-West University	South Africa
L10	Male	Health sciences	University of Winneba	Ghana

via Zoom between 11 February and 11 March 2022, lasting between 25 to 35 minutes each. Our interview guide (see Table 2) was based on the researchers' experience and knowledge of the platform, as well as earlier research by Appel and Falgas [2019] and Osman and Cunningham [2020], who focused on the French and the Australian editions of *The Conversation*, respectively. Our questions focused on the authors' perceptions of *TC Africa* and how these differed from mainstream media, as well as exploring the perceived benefits and risks associated with publishing on the platform. To capture both, we did not ask about experiences in general but divided this into two evaluative aspects. The interviews were transcribed and analysed in ATLAS.ti 9 using deductive-inductive coding. The deductive codes were based on past literature to categorise and align responses relevant to research questions. Inductive coding was applied to expand and streamline deductive codes. Hence, the iterative coding process was conducted as a cycle in which material was read first, then (deductive) codes were tested initially, reviewed, and then refined. Coders met regularly over the span of three weeks to discuss their codings and experiences, and they noted when inductive codes were needed. Accordingly, recoding of the same material with deductive-inductive codes allowed testing again, which included merging of similar codes and deleting irrelevant ones. This process was repeated until consensus was reached and clear, stable, and complete codes emerged from the data. The iterative process included building higher-order themes to answer the RQs. Thus, the coding was checked and refined over various cycles to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.

Table 2. Interview guide.

Research questions	*Interview questions*
What benefits do authors perceive from writing for *TC Africa*?	What personal benefits (if any) did you experience or perceive from writing for *TC Africa*? [Probe: objectives, rewards, recognition, positive feedback, other outcomes?] What incentives, support or encouragement do you perceive (or experience) inside your university to write for *TC Africa*? What feedback do you get from your colleagues and peers about the articles you publish on *TC Africa*?
What barriers and risks do authors perceive when writing for *TC Africa*?	What are the biggest hurdles, barriers, or challenges that you experience in terms of writing for *TC Africa*? What risks or disadvantages have you experienced?
How do authors perceive *TC Africa* in terms of its definition and purpose?	In a few words, if you had to explain what *TC Africa* is to someone who does not know it, what would you say? What (in your view) is the purpose of *TC Africa*?
Do authors see differences between writing for *TC Africa* and engaging directly with mainstream media?	In your view, how does the content provided by *TC Africa* differ from content written by mainstream journalists? How do you feel about the quality of the content provided by *TC Africa* compared to mainstream media?
How do authors experience their collaboration with the editors at *TC Africa*?	What are the most significant challenges during the process of editing the articles and getting to the final, approved version of the article? Have you pitched stories to *TC Africa* that were rejected by the editors? [Probe: were you satisfied with their decision and reasons provided?] According to the publishing model of *TC Africa*, the author (researcher) must give the final approval for an article to be published. Have you experienced instances where this was not possible (after the editorial process), and the article had to be abandoned?

3 ▪ Results

Below, we present our findings per RQ, comparing perspectives from the prolific and limited authors/interviewees with illustrative quotes.

3.1 ▪ *The distribution of gender, population group, and research field among the scientists writing for TC Africa (RQ1)*

Among the 3560 authors identified in the current study — i.e., scientists who wrote for *TC Africa* during the first five years after the launch of this platform — most were male (N = 2035; 57%) compared to female (N = 1525; 43%), and most were white (N = 2191; 62%) compared to black (N = 1367; 38%). Their scientific disciplines were predominantly social sciences (N = 1550; 44%), followed by health sciences (N = 687; 19%), natural sciences (N = 592; 17%), humanities (N = 523; 15%), agricultural sciences (N = 105; 3%), and lastly engineering and applied technologies (N = 102; 3%). Regarding the number of articles published (Mdn = 1), most scientists published only once (n = 2410; 68%), only 66 authors published more than 10 times (1.8%), and the highest number of articles published by one author was 64.

3.2 ▪ *Perceived benefits from writing for TC Africa (RQ2)*

The authors recognised a range of benefits offered by the platform. The most frequently mentioned benefits were providing the public with access to reliable information directly

from experts and giving researchers a way to disseminate their research and expert opinion to a wider audience. In particular, several authors noted that *TC Africa* enabled them to reach policymakers, civil servants, funders, changemakers, and lobby groups, which helped them ensure that their research could make a difference in society. They were also aware of the enhanced impact when their articles were republished by other media outlets. A couple of authors also commented on the personal growth and confidence boost that publishing to a broader audience could provide.

> "*I mean I've got I think over six hundred thousand reads on The Conversation [...] and that's more people than will ever read anything else I've ever written.*" [P3]

> "*... it gets into all sorts of channels and spaces that give it much, much wider public rivet than just The Conversation...*" [L4]

> "*Policymakers pay attention to what's in the press. They don't pay any attention to what's published in academic journals.*" [P1]

Some authors added that they used the platform as a networking tool to attract interest in their work, foster research collaborations, secure funding and job opportunities, and advance public engagement.

Regarding career growth, several authors recognised the platform's value in presenting themselves as academics interested in interacting with the media. They also acknowledged that the platform helped them attract students and research grants and generally improved recognition for their work. Almost all the prolific writers mentioned that they were approached for interviews by journalists from several media platforms, such as radio, television, and news organisations, while half of the limited authors mentioned that their articles led to collaborations on other research projects.

> "*We often think that going to conferences is where we find a lot of collaborations but it's through these science communication portals where you find quite a bit of collaborations.*" [L5]

Several authors commented on the usefulness of the articles that they published in *TC Africa* post-publication. Since these articles explained their work in shorter and more accessible formats, researchers were able to use them as teaching materials in their classes and reshare them via newsletters, personal websites, and social media channels. Most of the authors received positive feedback from their colleagues and peers in terms of interest in their work and congratulations on their published articles. Several prolific authors said that they enjoyed writing and that being published gave them a thrill.

Authors were generally able to recall incentives from their institutions, as well as from research funders, that supported their writing for *TC Africa*, such as writing workshops, words of encouragement, letters of recognition from research offices and deans, and a specific institutional reward for contributions to *TC Africa*. A few researchers noted that institutions

encourage their research staff to write for the platform to gain institutional exposure and recognition.

Despite these benefits that were mentioned, most prolific authors and half of the limited authors argued that they wrote for *TC Africa* motivated by a perception of moral duty and social responsibility and that they did not expect or experience any tangible career benefits.

> "*I do think that if you have something to say, you should say it in The Conversation because the general public, whoever they are, may or may not want to read it but should have the chance.*" [P3]

3.3 ▪ *Barriers and risks associated with writing for TC Africa (RQ3)*

The most frequently mentioned limitation of writing for *TC Africa* is related to the word limit of 800 words imposed by the platform. Several prolific and limited authors agreed that this posed a risk of oversimplification, because their scientific papers usually consisted of 7000+ words. A general concern was that being forced to write such short articles meant that authors could not provide sufficient evidence to support their views. Several limited writers mentioned that if you publish an article on *TC Africa*, you risk receiving adverse reactions to your work from a broad audience that sometimes does not understand your field of research.

Other disadvantages included the platform having no peer-review process and only allowing academic authors to publish, meaning the opportunity to co-publish with advocates and activists was lost.

Regarding barriers, time constraints were frequently mentioned as a reason for not writing more articles. Others said they were still waiting for their research to be peer-reviewed and published before submitting another piece. Several authors raised the concern that their institutions did not support or help them make full use of this platform.

> "*I think that's a real problem. If The Conversation needs to succeed, it needs to be backed by the leadership of universities. Professionals need incentives, positive incentives from inside the system.*" [P1]

Only a few authors mentioned specific risks. One author was attacked on social media after publishing an article about a controversial topic. Notably, one author said that she felt fearful of being visible in the media because it might undermine her seriousness as an academic, and therefore, she limited the number of articles she wrote for the platform.

> "*I am treading quite carefully in terms of how much I do by way of output. I would like the people to take me seriously as opposed to just churning out stuff every week.*" [L7]

Importantly, a couple of authors agreed that they could not identify any risk or disadvantage related to *TC Africa*.

3.4 ▪ *The definition and purpose of TC Africa (RQ4)*

Authors generally viewed *TC Africa* as an accessible online platform for academics to disseminate their research to a broad public audience, noting that it covered a wide range of topics across natural and social science disciplines.

> "*I think if you want a quick and easy-to-read insight into what academics are doing at any given point in time across disciplines, that's the right place to go.*" [P3]

In terms of its overall goals, almost all authors agreed that the purpose of *TC Africa* was to build bridges and create connections between academic environments and the public domain. They noted that the platform gave academics a voice on a journalistic platform and an opportunity to explain their findings in layman's terms. It was also described as a vehicle for truth because of its commitment to providing reliable, credible, and evidence-based information.

The authors we interviewed identified several more purposes of the platform. These included making research more accessible in a free and understandable format, helping to find solutions to social questions for the general betterment of society, and providing a conduit for public dialogue and debate over a wide spectrum of topics.

3.5 ▪ *What are the differences between writing for TC Africa and engaging directly with mainstream media? (RQ5)*

Most authors agreed that *TC Africa* offered advantages compared to mainstream media, especially because it was less sensationalised.

> "*I think media houses have to sell, and so they have to look for an edge, an angle and whether it's a scandal […]. They got to have a headline. I don't think The Conversation always feels the need for a headline.*" [P3]

A key difference perceived by authors was that the platform allowed them to take control of the content and timing, thereby avoiding the possibility of journalists misinterpreting their views. Accordingly, they saw *TC Africa* as more factual, credible, trustworthy, evidence-based, and objective than mainstream journalism, with more rigorous editing and quality-control processes in place.

> "*In an era of fake news and massive disinformation campaigns, where information is used to propagate evil, violence, hate and division. […] it is imperative that journalism stands up to that […] and I think The Conversation is one such place.*" [P1]

> "*People don't want fake news. They want to tap for the information from the source. And thanks to The Conversation, they get the info directly from the researchers. Not from a journalist who asked another journalist who asked a scientist.*" [P2]

While some authors complained about the word limit imposed by *TC Africa*, they also recognised that the articles were generally longer than those appearing in mainstream media. Moreover, they noted that the platform's cross-referencing with hyperlinks allows for more layered information and in-depth analysis. Furthermore, several prolific and limited authors remarked that the editing process and quality control processes employed by *TC Africa* were more rigorous compared to mainstream media and that the platform allowed researchers from a wide range of disciplines to share their work.

3.6 ▪ *Collaboration with the editors at TC Africa (RQ6)*

Most authors (almost all in the limited group) said that they found it challenging to shorten their long jargon-heavy journal articles to 800 words without losing the essence of the academic work.

> "*You know academics try to be nuanced and subtle and that's quite difficult in 800 words. It's not impossible but it's quite difficult.*" [P3]

While some authors found the editorial process at *TC Africa* helpful, about half of the authors in both the prolific and limited groups found it quite challenging because it was time-consuming and sometimes altered the original meaning of their writing.

> "*[…] they edit substantially sometimes to change the meaning of what you wanted to say in the first place. Editing for language is one thing, editing to change the meaning of something to suit you and what you want to convey, is quite different.*" [P4]

Half of the prolific and limited authors had an article idea rejected. Some of the reasons for rejection included the topic being saturated, too general, or lacking a specific research study with data to support it. Two prolific authors and one limited author withdrew their articles because the editors changed them too much or they did not have time to complete them.

4 ▪ Discussion

In this study, we found that the typical profile of a *TC Africa* author is a male, white social scientist who engages with the platform as a one-off activity rather than through sustained participation. These researchers are primarily driven by a strong sense of moral duty and social responsibility, viewing the platform as a critical bridge that connects academic environments with the public domain while offering distinct advantages over mainstream media. While authors value the platform's ability to amplify their voices and provide positive institutional visibility, significant barriers remain. Specifically, the risk of oversimplification (necessitated by word limits), time constraints, and a persistent lack of formal institutional recognition continue to act as major structural deterrents to participation.

Our study shows that *The Conversation* (with *TC Africa* as the African edition) offers a novel way for scientists to make their work more visible and accessible to public and policy audiences [Appel & Falgas, 2019; Guenther & Joubert, 2021; Riedlinger et al., 2021]. Our

findings also confirm that most academic authors write for the platform only once, but that about one quarter of academics go on to write for the platform multiple times, matching patterns observed in other regions [Hermida & Young, 2019]. Researchers who wrote for *TC Africa* appreciated the platform's editorial model, which maintains journalistic oversight while ensuring that scientists retain final approval of their articles. This arrangement fundamentally shifts the traditional power dynamics between scientists and journalists, thereby mitigating some of the tensions that historically characterised science-media relationships. Notably, some authors still found it challenging to navigate the process whereby editors would shorten and edit their copy.

While white, male scientists made up more than half of the *TC Africa* authors in our study, the authorship share of female and black authors was 43% and 38%, respectively, indicating they are also active participants in this platform, and that the platform has the potential to increase diversity and inclusivity among scientists who engage with society. Previous studies [Joubert et al., 2022; Joubert & Guenther, 2017] have emphasised the importance of enhancing diversity among publicly visible scientists in the media, particularly in regions where historical disparities have limited access to science communication opportunities. By enabling a more diverse range of experts to appear in journalistic contexts, *TC Africa* may help counter entrenched patterns of source inequality in science news.

Our findings also align with earlier studies showing that social sciences and humanities scholars are generally more active in public engagements than their counterparts in the natural and physical sciences [Entradas & Bauer, 2017; Entradas & Bauer, 2019]. The prevalence of social scientists and humanities scholars as authors in *TC Africa* suggests that this group may find it easier to adapt their expertise to societal discourse and take on the roles of public intellectuals. Moreover, their focus on societal and policy-related issues may make their research more naturally suited to the format of *TC Africa*. Interestingly, other studies from South Africa have shown that social science voices are relatively under-represented in the mass media [see, for example, Joubert et al., 2022]. As such, it can be considered a positive finding that social scientists and humanities scholars embrace the public engagement opportunities presented by *TC Africa*.

Most of the authors we interviewed were driven by a strong sense of moral duty and social responsibility to write for *TC Africa* and viewed this platform as an avenue to enhance their public visibility, reach policymakers, and increase the societal impact of their research. They also reported intrinsic rewards such as personal satisfaction and enjoyment, as well as networking opportunities. However, tangible institutional rewards — such as career incentives, funding recognition, or professional advancement — remained limited. Our findings align with research on scientists' objectives for engaging with public audiences and the drivers that motivate researchers to write for *The Conversation*, revealing a complex blend of personal and professional motivations alongside the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards [Bao et al., 2024; Besley et al., 2018; Calice et al., 2022; Gavhi-Molefe et al., 2021; Blanchett et al., 2025; Hermida & Young, 2019; Osman & Cunningham, 2020; Young & Hermida, 2020]. An interesting finding was the positive feedback authors received from colleagues, suggesting the growing acceptance of *TC Africa* as a legitimate engagement platform for academics, particularly as many universities support and/or fund the initiative [Guenther & Joubert, 2021].

Authors' concerns about the 800-word limit of *TC Africa* articles suggest they find it difficult to adapt to a journalistic writing style and would prefer to write longer articles that would allow them to provide more context and detail. They were primarily concerned about the risks of oversimplification and that writing for a public-facing platform could tarnish their academic credibility, concerns that have also been highlighted by Dempster et al. [2022] and Rose et al. [2020]. These concerns can be addressed via training by expert science writers who can equip scientists with the confidence and skills to write in shorter, popular formats without sacrificing accuracy.

Amidst pressures to prioritise academic outputs, time constraints remain a significant barrier, preventing researchers from spending time on writing for public platforms. In the absence of formal incentives (such as institutional recognition or rewards), scientists find it hard to make time for writing for non-academic purposes. Universities and research funders could address this by formally recognising public communication outputs in grant applications, performance evaluations, and research impact assessments.

5 ▪ Conclusion

This study set out to understand the characteristics of *TC Africa* authors and to explore how they experience and evaluate writing for this platform. The findings reveal a clear authorship profile: during the platform's first five years, most *TC Africa* authors were male, white, predominantly drawn from the social sciences and health sciences. Most published only once, suggesting that sustained engagement remains the exception rather than the rule.

Academics' responses to the platform's hybrid nature were shaped primarily by how well the editorial model aligned with their professional values and identities. The feature that mattered most was the ability to initiate articles and retain final approval before publication. This arrangement addressed the central concern that scientists have historically raised about media engagement: the fear of losing control over how their work is represented. As a result, most authors perceived *TC Africa* as more credible, rigorous, and less sensationalised than mainstream media. At the same time, the 800-word limit strained their disciplinary instinct for nuance and qualification, and about half of the authors found the editorial process challenging.

The way authors weighed risks against benefits was revealing. Most prolific authors and half of the limited authors wrote primarily out of a sense of moral duty and social responsibility, rather than in pursuit of concrete career rewards. The principal benefits they valued, such as reaching policymakers, enabling public access to reliable research, and achieving wider societal impact, aligned with civic rather than institutional motivations. For those who engaged more frequently, a conviction that researchers have an obligation to share their expertise with society was the deciding factor. For those who engaged less, the binding constraints were structural: time pressures, inadequate institutional recognition, and the academic publication cycle. Notably, a small number of authors (particularly women) consciously limited their engagement for fear that media visibility might undermine their academic credibility. This reflects broader gendered patterns in the norms around public engagement that extend beyond this platform.

Disciplinary culture proved to be a significant organising factor. The prevalence of social scientists and humanities scholars among *TC Africa* authors mirrors the broader pattern in

science communication research, where these disciplines demonstrate stronger traditions of public engagement. In the African context, this carries particular significance: other studies have found that social science voices are underrepresented in South Africa's mainstream media, making the supply-driven model of *TC Africa*, where researchers pitch their own stories, a meaningful corrective.

More broadly, this study illuminates a set of tensions that are likely to characterise engagement with amplifier platforms beyond *TC Africa*. Such platforms reduce some barriers to public engagement by giving researchers greater agency than traditional media allow, but they introduce new tensions through the demands of journalistic formatting and the public exposure that follows. Examining these experiences, therefore, helps us understand how researchers position themselves within a shifting research communication landscape, how they navigate competing demands from institutions, the public, and the media, and how they assess whether such platforms support or complicate their engagement practices. In this sense, researchers' attitudes toward *The Conversation* illuminate broader dynamics shaping contemporary science communication and the conditions under which academics choose to participate. The gap between institutional encouragement of outreach and genuine structural support for it, through rewards, time allocation, and career recognition, remains a substantive obstacle. Closing that gap is a precondition for platforms like *TC Africa* to fulfil their potential as amplifiers of African research voices in an increasingly complex information environment and fast-evolving media ecosystem.

6 ▪ Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be noted. We analysed only authors and articles published in the first five years of *TC Africa*. Gender was measured as a binary variable, reflecting the methodological parameters we adopted; future research should employ more expansive measures. The 21 authors interviewed — most of them based in South Africa — were selected to capture a range of experiences, but the sample remains small and geographically limited. In some cases, certain open-ended questions may have restricted respondents' elaborations; beginning with broader prompts before narrowing to more focused questions should be applied more consistently in future studies.

While our approach provides a focused case study, it represents a single science communication platform, and we acknowledge that our findings may not be fully generalisable to other media contexts or regions. Our qualitative study design does not allow quantification of our findings; qualitative analysis can be subjective. The role of the interviewer, as well as the use of a pre-determined set of questions, may have shaped the nature of the responses.

Nevertheless, as this study showed, given the limited opportunities for African scientists to engage directly with the media, platforms such as *TC Africa* contribute to public communication of and engagement with science and offer a foundation for further research across more diverse platforms and contexts.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the management team at *The Conversation* for their assistance.

References

Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *50*(2), 179–211. https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-t

Albæk, E., Christiansen, P. M., & Togeby, L. (2003). Experts in the mass media: researchers as sources in Danish daily newspapers, 1961–2001. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *80*(4), 937–948. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900308000412

Anzivino, M. (2021). Is public engagement gendered? An analytical proposal using some evidence from Italy. *Public Understanding of Science*, *30*(7), 827–840. https://doi.org/10.1177/09636625211002060

Appel, V., & Falgas, J. (2019). The Conversation France: une rencontre entre universitaires et journalistes [The Conversation France: a meeting between academics and journalists]. *Communication*, *36*(2). https://doi.org/10.4000/communication.10498

Bailey, C., Southey, C., Sikhakhane, J., & Thurston, L. (2025). The Conversation Africa's first 10 years: a story of new media powered by generosity. *The Conversation*. https://doi.org/10.64628/aaj.smsenrtd4

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: a social cognitive theory*. Prentice-Hall.

Bao, L., Calice, M. N., Brossard, D., Scheufele, D. A., & Markowitz, E. M. (2024). Are productive scientists more willing to engage with the public? *Science Communication*, *46*(1), 65–91. https://doi.org/10.1177/10755470231217682

Bartleman, M., Dubois, E., & Macdonald, I. (2024). A framework for examining hybridity: the case of academic explanatory journalism. *Convergence: the International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*. https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565241255044

Besley, J. C., Dudo, A., Yuan, S., & Lawrence, F. (2018). Understanding scientists' willingness to engage. *Science Communication*, *40*(5), 559–590. https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547018786561

Besley, J. C., Garlick, S., Fallon Lambert, K., & Tiffany, L. A. (2021). The role of communication professionals in fostering a culture of public engagement. *International Journal of Science Education, Part B*, *11*(3), 225–241. https://doi.org/10.1080/21548455.2021.1943763

Besley, J. C., Newman, T. P., Dudo, A., & Tiffany, L. A. (2021). American scientists' willingness to use different communication tactics. *Science Communication*, *43*(4), 486–507. https://doi.org/10.1177/10755470211011159

Blanchett, N., Ono, S., Lecourt, S., & Hillis, C. (2025). *The Conversation* Canada and journalistic boundaries: a case study in the challenges of defining journalism. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *50*(1), 115–144. https://doi.org/10.3138/cjc-2024-0032

Borlaug, S. B., Karaulova, M., Svartefoss, S. M., Sivertsen, G., Meijer, I., van Leeuwen, T., & Hessels, L. K. (2024). Researchers engaging with society: who does what? *Science and Public Policy*, *51*(4), 618–642. https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scae006

Burns, J. A., Holden, S., Korzec, K., & Dorris, E. R. (2021). From intent to implementation: factors affecting public involvement in life science research. *PLoS ONE*, *16*(4), e0250023. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0250023

Calice, M. N., Beets, B., Bao, L., Scheufele, D. A., Freiling, I., Brossard, D., Feinstein, N. W., Heisler, L., Tangen, T., & Handelsman, J. (2022). Public engagement: faculty lived experiences and perspectives underscore barriers and a changing culture in academia. *PLoS ONE*, *17*(6), e0269949. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0269949

Chen, A., Zhang, X., & Jin, J. (2023). The Sagan effect and scientists' public outreach participation in China: multilayered roles of social norms and rewards. *Science Communication*, *45*(1), 12–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/10755470221143077

Claassen, G. (2011). Science and the media in South Africa: reflecting a 'dirty mirror'. *Communicatio*, *37*(3), 351–366. https://doi.org/10.1080/02500167.2011.622288

Cologna, V., Knutti, R., Oreskes, N., & Siegrist, M. (2021). Majority of German citizens, US citizens and climate scientists support policy advocacy by climate researchers and expect greater political engagement. *Environmental Research Letters*, *16*(2), 024011. https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/abd4ac

Crettaz von Roten, F. (2011). Gender differences in scientists' public outreach and engagement activities. *Science Communication*, *33*(1), 52–75. https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547010378658

Crettaz von Roten, F., & Goastellec, G. (2015). Understanding academics' popular science publishing: institution culture and management style effects. *Journal for New Generation Sciences*, *13*(2), 15–29. https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC182370

Dempster, G., Sutherland, G., & Keogh, L. (2022). Scientific research in news media: a case study of misrepresentation, sensationalism and harmful recommendations. *JCOM*, *21*(01), A06. https://doi.org/10.22323/2.21010206

Dijkstra, A., Roefs, M. M., & Drossaert, C. H. C. (2015). The science-media interaction in biomedical research in the Netherlands. Opinions of scientists and journalists on the science-media relationship. *JCOM*, *14*(02), A03. https://doi.org/10.22323/2.14020203

Driscoll, D. A., Garrard, G. E., Kusmanoff, A. M., Dovers, S., Maron, M., Preece, N., Pressey, R. L., & Ritchie, E. G. (2021). Consequences of information suppression in ecological and conservation sciences. *Conservation Letters*, *14*(1), e12757. https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12757

Dudo, A. (2013). Toward a model of scientists' public communication activity: the case of biomedical researchers. *Science Communication*, *35*(4), 476–501. https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547012460845

Dudo, A., & Besley, J. C. (2016). Scientists' prioritization of communication objectives for public engagement. *PLoS ONE*, *11*(2), e0148867. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0148867

Dunwoody, S., Brossard, D., & Dudo, A. (2009). Socialization or rewards? Predicting U.S. scientist-media interactions. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *86*(2), 299–314. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900908600203

Dunwoody, S., & Ryan, M. (1985). Scientific barriers to the popularization of science in the mass media. *Journal of Communication*, *35*(1), 26–42. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1985.tb01882.x

Ecklund, E. H., James, S. A., & Lincoln, A. E. (2012). How academic biologists and physicists view science outreach. *PLoS ONE*, *7*(5), e36240. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0036240

Eldridge II, S. A. (2019). Where do we draw the line? Interlopers, (ant)agonists, and an unbounded journalistic field. *Media and Communication*, *7*(4), 8–18. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i4.2295

Entradas, M. (2022). Public communication at research universities: moving towards (de)centralised communication of science? *Public Understanding of Science*, *31*(5), 634–647. https://doi.org/10.1177/09636625211058309

Entradas, M., & Bauer, M. M. (2017). Mobilisation for public engagement: benchmarking the practices of research institutes. *Public Understanding of Science*, *26*(7), 771–788. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662516633834

Entradas, M., & Bauer, M. W. (2019). Bustling public communication by astronomers around the world driven by personal and contextual factors. *Nature Astronomy*, *3*(2), 183–187. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41550-018-0633-7

Entradas, M., Bauer, M. W., O'Muircheartaigh, C., Marcinkowski, F., Okamura, A., Pellegrini, G., Besley, J., Massarani, L., Russo, P., Dudo, A., Saracino, B., Silva, C., Kano, K., Amorim, L., Bucchi, M., Suerdem, A., Oyama, T., & Li, Y.-Y. (2020). Public communication by research institutes compared across countries and sciences: building capacity for engagement or competing for visibility? *PLoS ONE*, *15*(7), e0235191. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0235191

Entradas, M., Marcelino, J., Bauer, M. W., & Lewenstein, B. (2019). Public communication by climate scientists: what, with whom and why? *Climatic Change*, *154*(1–2), 69–85. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-019-02414-9

Fahy, D., & Nisbet, M. C. (2011). The science journalist online: shifting roles and emerging practices. *Journalism*, *12*(7), 778–793. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884911412697

Fecher, B., & Hebing, M. (2021). How do researchers approach societal impact? *PLoS ONE*, *16*(7), e0254006. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0254006

Fleerackers, A., Riedlinger, M., Bruns, A., & Burgess, J. (2024). Academic explanatory journalism and emerging COVID-19 science: how social media accounts amplify *The Conversation*'s preprint coverage. *Media International Australia*, *192*(1), 130–149. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878x221145022

Gavhi-Molefe, M. R., Jensen, E., & Joubert, M. (2021). Why scientists agree to participate in science festivals: evidence from South Africa. *International Journal of Science Education, Part B*, *11*(2), 127–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/21548455.2021.1905904

Ginosar, A., Zimmerman, I., & Tal, T. (2024). Peripheral science journalism: scientists and journalists dancing on the same floor. *Journalism Practice*, *18*(4), 918–937. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2022.2072368

Guenther, L., & Joubert, M. (2021). Novel interfaces in science communication: comparing journalistic and social media uptake of articles published by *The Conversation Africa*. *Public Understanding of Science*, *30*(8), 1041–1057. https://doi.org/10.1177/09636625211019312

Guenther, L., Schröder, J. T., Reif, A., Brück, J., Taddicken, M., Weingart, P., & Jonas, E. (2024). Intermediaries in the limelight: how exposure to trust cues in content about science affects public trust in science. *JCOM*, *23*(09), A06. https://doi.org/10.22323/2.23090206

Guenther, L., Weingart, P., & Joubert, M. (2019). Bridging a gap — mapping the science coverage of South African newspapers. In M. W. Bauer, P. Pansegrau & R. Shukla (Eds.), *The cultural authority of science: comparing across Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas* (pp. 122–136). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315163284

Hamlyn, B., Shanahan, M., Lewis, H., O'Donoghue, E., Hanson, T., & Burchell, K. (2015). *Factors affecting public engagement by researchers: a study on behalf of a consortium of UK public research funders*. TNS BMRB. Policy Studies Institute, University of Westminster. https://cms.wellcome.org/sites/default/files/wtp060033_0.pdf

Hermida, A., Varano, L., & Young, M. L. (2022). The university as a "giant newsroom": not-for-profit explanatory journalism during COVID-19. In P. Ferrucci & S. A. Eldridge II (Eds.), *The institutions changing journalism: barbarians inside the gate* (pp. 59–72). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003140399

Hermida, A., & Young, M. L. (2019). From peripheral to integral? A digital-born journalism not for profit in a time of crises. *Media and Communication*, *7*(4), 92–102. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i4.2269

Heyl, A., Joubert, M., & Guenther, L. (2020). Churnalism and hype in science communication: comparing university press releases and journalistic articles in South Africa. *Communicatio*, *46*(2), 126–145. https://doi.org/10.1080/02500167.2020.1789184

Ho, S. S., Looi, J., & Goh, T. J. (2020). Scientists as public communicators: individual- and institutional-level motivations and barriers for public communication in Singapore. *Asian Journal of Communication*, *30*(2), 155–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2020.1748072

Holton, A. E., & Belair-Gagnon, V. (2018). Strangers to the game? Interlopers, intralopers, and shifting news production. *Media and Communication*, *6*(4), 70–78. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i4.1490

Jarvis, S. N., Ebersole, C. R., Nguyen, C. Q., Zhu, M., & Kray, L. J. (2022). Stepping up to the mic: gender gaps in participation in live question-and-answer sessions at academic conferences. *Psychological Science*, *33*(11), 1882–1893. https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976221094036

Johnson, J., Sharman, Z., Vissandjée, B., & Stewart, D. E. (2014). Does a change in health research funding policy related to the integration of sex and gender have an impact? *PLoS ONE*, *9*(6), e99900. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0099900

Joubert, M. (2018). Country-specific factors that compel South African scientists to engage with public audiences. *JCOM*, *17*(04), C04. https://doi.org/10.22323/2.17040304

Joubert, M., & Guenther, L. (2017). In the footsteps of Einstein, Sagan and Barnard: identifying South Africa's most visible scientists. *South African Journal of Science*, *113*(11/12), #2017-0033. https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2017/20170033

Joubert, M., Guenther, L., & Rademan, L. (2022). Expert voices in South African mass media during the COVID-19 pandemic. *South African Journal of Science*, *118*(5/6), #12480. https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2022/12480

Joubert, M., & Mkansi, S. (2020). South Africa: science communication throughout turbulent times. In T. Gascoigne, B. Schiele, J. Leach, M. Riedlinger, B. V. Lewenstein, L. Massarani & P. Broks (Eds.), *Communicating science: a global perspective* (pp. 771–800). ANU Press. https://doi.org/10.22459/CS.2020.32

Kiernan, V. (1997). Ingelfinger, embargoes, and other controls on the dissemination of science news. *Science Communication*, *18*(4), 297–319. https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547097018004002

Kotcher, J. E., Myers, T. A., Vraga, E. K., Stenhouse, N., & Maibach, E. W. (2017). Does engagement in advocacy hurt the credibility of scientists? Results from a randomized national survey experiment. *Environmental Communication*, *11*(3), 415–429. https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2016.1275736

Lack, C. W., & Rousseau, J. (2016). *Critical thinking, science, and pseudoscience: why we can't trust our brains*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826194268

Lawson, C., & Salter, A. (2023). The reverse engagement gap: gender differences in external engagement among UK academics. *Studies in Higher Education*, *48*(5), 695–706. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2184790

Marcinkowski, F., Kohring, M., Fürst, S., & Friedrichsmeier, A. (2014). Organizational influence on scientists' efforts to go public: an empirical investigation. *Science Communication*, *36*(1), 56–80. https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547013494022

Massarani, L., & Peters, H. P. (2016). Scientists in the public sphere: interactions of scientists and journalists in Brazil. *Anais da Academia Brasileira de Ciências*, *88*(2), 1165–1175. https://doi.org/10.1590/0001-3765201620150558

Matsilele, T., Msimanga, M. J., Tshuma, L., & Jamil, S. (2025). Reporting on science in the Southern African context: exploring influences on journalistic practice. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, *60*(5), 2729–2746. https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231224668

Merton, R. K. (1942). A note on science and democracy. *Journal of Legal and Political Sociology*, *1*, 115–126.

Merton, R. K. (1968). The Matthew effect in science: the reward and communication systems of science are considered. *Science*, *159*(3810), 56–63. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.159.3810.56

Merton, R. K. (1973). *The sociology of science: theoretical and empirical investigations*. University of Chicago Press.

Moorhead, L. L., Fleerackers, A., & Maggio, L. (2023). "It's my job": a qualitative study of the mediatization of science within the scientist-journalist relationship. *JCOM*, *22*(04), A05. https://doi.org/10.22323/2.22040205

Nelkin, D. (1995). *Selling science: how the press covers science and technology*. W.H. Freeman.

Nguyen, A., & Tran, M. (2019). Science journalism for development in the Global South: a systematic literature review of issues and challenges. *Public Understanding of Science*, *28*(8), 973–990. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662519875447

Olesk, A. (2021). The types of visible scientists. *JCOM*, *20*(02), A06. https://doi.org/10.22323/2.20020206

Osman, K., & Cunningham, S. (2019). Engagement and impact through 'amplifier platforms'. *Australian Universities' Review*, *61*(2), 42–48. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1228012.pdf

Osman, K., & Cunningham, S. (2020). 'Amplifier' platforms and impact: Australian scholars' use of *The Conversation*. *Australian Universities' Review*, *62*(1), 41–50. https://eprints.qut.edu.au/199355/

Peters, H. P. (2013). Gap between science and media revisited: scientists as public communicators. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *110*(supplement_3), 14102–14109. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1212745110

Peters, H. P., Dunwoody, S., Allgaier, J., Lo, Y.-Y., & Brossard, D. (2014). Public communication of science 2.0: is the communication of science via the "new media" online a genuine transformation or old wine in new bottles? *EMBO Reports*, *15*(7), 749–753. https://doi.org/10.15252/embr.201438979

Phillips, A. A., Walsh, C. R., Grayson, K. A., Penney, C. E., Husain, F., & the Women Doing Science Team. (2022). Diversifying representations of female scientists on social media: a case study from the Women Doing Science Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, *8*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221113068

Poliakoff, E., & Webb, T. L. (2007). What factors predict scientists' intentions to participate in public engagement of science activities? *Science Communication*, *29*(2), 242–263. https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547007308009

Püttmann, V., Ruhose, J., & Thomsen, S. L. (2023). Academics' attitudes toward engaging in public discussions: experimental evidence on the impact of engagement conditions. *Research in Higher Education*, *64*(5), 765–788. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-022-09725-4

Rainie, L., Funk, C., & Anderson, M. (2015). *How scientists engage the public*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/02/15/how-scientists-engage-public/

Rauchfleisch, A., & Schäfer, M. S. (2018). Structure and development of science communication research: co-citation analysis of a developing field. *JCOM*, *17*(03), A07. https://doi.org/10.22323/2.17030207

Riedlinger, M., Fleerackers, A., Bruns, A., Burgess, J., Guenther, L., Joubert, M., & Osman, K. (2021). *The Conversation*, ten years on: assessing the impact of a unique scholarly publishing initiative. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, *2021*. https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2021i0.12130

Riley, J., Joubert, M., & Guenther, L. (2022). Motivations and barriers for young scientists to engage with society: perspectives from South Africa. *International Journal of Science Education, Part B*, *12*(2), 157–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/21548455.2022.2049392

Riley, J. W., & Riley, M. W. (1959). Mass communication and the social system. In R. K. Merton, L. Broom & L. S. Cottrell (Eds.), *Sociology today: problems and prospects* (pp. 537–578). Basic Books.

Roedema, T., Broerse, J., & Kupper, F. (2021). "Who is going to believe me, if I say 'I'm a researcher?'" — Scientists' role repertoires in online public engagement. *JCOM*, *20*(03), A03. https://doi.org/10.22323/2.20030203

Rose, K. M., Markowitz, E. M., & Brossard, D. (2020). Scientists' incentives and attitudes toward public communication. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *117*(3), 1274–1276. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1916740117

Scheffauer, R., Goyanes, M., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2024). Social media algorithmic versus professional journalists' news selection: effects of gate keeping on traditional and social media news trust. *Journalism*, *25*(4), 755–778. https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231179804

Searle, S. D. (2012). Scientists' engagement with the public. In J. K. Gilbert & S. Stocklmayer (Eds.), *Communication and engagement with science and technology: issues and dilemmas. A reader in science communication* (pp. 41–57). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203807521

Singh, G. G., Farjalla, V. F., Chen, B., Pelling, A. E., Ceyhan, E., Dominik, M., Alisic, E., Kerr, J., Selin, N. E., Bassioni, G., Bennett, E., Kemp, A. H., & Chan, K. M. (2019). Researcher engagement in policy deemed societally beneficial yet unrewarded. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, *17*(7), 375–382. https://doi.org/10.1002/fee.2084

The Conversation. (2020). *Five years in review*. The Conversation Africa. https://cdn.theconversation.com/static_files/files/1338/AF_five_year_report_-_The_Conversation_FA_3.pdf

Torres-Albero, C., Fernández-Esquinas, M., Rey-Rocha, J., & Martín-Sempere, M. J. (2011). Dissemination practices in the Spanish research system: scientists trapped in a golden cage. *Public Understanding of Science*, *20*(1), 12–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662510382361

Young, M. L., & Hermida, A. (2020). The Conversation Canada: not-for-profit journalism in a time of commercial media decline. In E. Dubois & F. Martin-Bariteau (Eds.), *Citizenship in a connected Canada: a research and policy agenda* (pp. 119–134). University of Ottawa Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.17610838.10

Zardo, P., Barnett, A. G., Suzor, N., & Cahill, T. (2018). Does engagement predict research use? An analysis of The Conversation Annual Survey 2016. *PLoS ONE*, *13*(2), e0192290. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0192290

About the authors

Lili Rademan is a postdoctoral fellow with the Public Engagement Exchange (PEX) at Stellenbosch University, focusing on leadership in public engagement with science. Her research strand examines how science and funding policies shape public engagement with science — tracing their evolution, measuring their impact, and exploring how key players perceive their ongoing significance. She recently completed her Ph.D. at the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST), specialising in science communication. Her research examined cancer pseudoscience in South African online news media and explored cancer researchers' perspectives on combatting misinformation. With a background in physiology and journalism, Lili brings an interdisciplinary approach to her work, driven by a passion for bridging science and art. She collaborates on research projects exploring expert voices in media, online science engagement platforms, and public engagement strategies. She also presents science communication courses and workshops, empowering researchers to make science more accessible and engaging. Her motto is: mind of a scientist, heart of an artist.

aerademan@sun.ac.za

Marina Joubert is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST), Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Her research focuses on science communication and public engagement with science, exploring how scientists, institutions, and communicators can engage more effectively with diverse publics and strengthen Africa's science communication ecosystem. She is particularly interested in

scientists as communicators, media representations of science, and the public communication of complex global health challenges, including antimicrobial resistance (#AMR) and vaccine confidence. She currently serves as the Deputy Editor of JCOM.

marinajoubert@sun.ac.za @marinajoubert

Lars Guenther (Ph.D., 2015, at Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany) is Professor of Communication Science at LMU Munich's Department of Media and Communication in Germany, and Extraordinary Associate Professor at the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. He is interested into public perceptions of (controversial) science, science and health journalism, trust in science, as well as the public communication about risks and scientific (un)certainty.

lars.guenther@ifkw.lmu.de

How to cite

Rademan, L., Joubert, M. and Guenther, L. (2026). 'Making science part of 'The Conversation' — benefits and barriers experienced by researchers as authors writing for The Conversation Africa'. *JCOM* 25(06), A03. https://doi.org/10.22323/3807202605231614 23.

ISSN 1824-2049. Published by SISSA Medialab. jcom.sissa.it