Ethics and practice in science communication

Book

PRIEST, S., GOODWIN, J. AND DAHLSTROM, M. F. EDS. (2018).
ETHICS AND PRACTICE IN SCIENCE COMMUNICATION.
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Reviewed by **Clare Wilkinson**

Abstract

It can be argued that ethical considerations in science communication are a significantly overlooked area although these considerations are implicit in many ongoing academic debates within the field, and within the practical implications of work which is being both constructed and shared within the discipline. Priest, Goodwin and Dahlstrom's (2018) edited collection, 'Ethics and Practice in Science Communication', is therefore a significant step forwards in allowing for contemporary reflection on the ethical considerations currently influencing the field. In shining a light on some of the ethical questions currently concerning the field of science communication, this enjoyable and detailed selection of chapters draws together a number of key examples and authors, to begin to consider such ethical quandaries, as well as identifying spaces, which are primed for further ethical exploration in the future.

Keywords Participation and science governance; Science and media; Science communication: theory and models

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It can be argued that ethical considerations in science communication are a significantly overlooked area [Wilkinson and Weitkamp, 2016], although these considerations are implicit in many ongoing academic debates within the field, and within the practical implications of work which is being both constructed and shared within the discipline. Priest, Goodwin and Dahlstrom [2018] edited collection, 'Ethics and Practice in Science Communication', is therefore a significant step forwards in allowing for contemporary reflection on the ethical considerations currently influencing the field. This seems all the more timely during a period when recent political and social contexts are bringing to light ethical quandaries around topics as diverse as gender, inclusivity, the environment and use of data. A critical reflection on the role of science communication, within such contexts, is therefore very much welcomed.

Despite its contemporary relevance, a good deal of this book revisits past conversations in the field of science communication, exploring new aspects in

regards to their ethical significance. Priest's fluent depiction of climate change accounts, for example, is refreshed by a consideration of the current political context at play and the associated ethical ramifications. In a similar vein, Paul B. Thomson's chapter on risk expertly considers slippery notions of 'risk', updating and modifying a previous article, to bring more bearing to the concept of risk, in the context of ethics. Sprain similarly provides a contained and clear account of 'framing' considered through an ethical lens, whilst Kruvand's discussion of 'expert sources' moves beyond a basic examination of how and why they are used, to consider the ethical dimensions overreliance on a selected number of key scientific characters may raise. Such chapters offer readers, who are relatively new to science communication, a comprehensive overview of a number key issues in the field, whilst providing new insights for those who are already familiar with the discipline, via the more detailed discussion of their ethical ramifications.

Part Two of the book focuses on professional practice, primarily examining a selection of approaches and mediums for communication, for example use of narrative in a chapter by Dahlstrom and Ho, as well as varying professional roles of relevance, such as that of the public relations professional or journalist. These chapters offered more implicit examples as to how to conduct science communication in an ethical manner, but also included a range of interesting theoretical and contextual questions regarding the role of science communication. A focus on specific examples is the emphasis of Part Three of the book, which presents a series of case studies. In some earlier chapters of the collection there is the occasional tendency to discuss areas of controversy which have been very well rehearsed in the literature at this point, topics such as vaccination, climate change, and evolution, for example. Though these subjects continue to be important, a greater breadth of examples, as provided in the case studies, offered some valuable new perspectives on ethics. A strength of the book is the range of disciplines drawn upon to consider the topics in hand, and for the science communication novice it signposts a wide range of relevant authors and theories.

One area, which may have been considered further, is the more practical implications for science communicators attempting to design, author and plan 'ethical' science communication. Chapters which came closest to providing some form of concrete ethical guidance, included Leah Sprain's exploration of framing in the context of seeking to create opportunities for democratic engagement and Brent Ranelli's interesting discussion on the role of 'persons' in science communication. Whilst stopping short of a series of guidelines, there were certainly a variety of points made in these chapters which could be extrapolated to considerations for good practice.

One possible reason for this lack of practical guidance was the emphasis of chapters within the collection on more reflexive and philosophical accounts, than normative or behavioural ethical direction. Letourneau's chapter 'Science Communication Ethics: A Reflexive View' proposes that such a normative approach may not even be possible in a field as diverse as science communication, but nonetheless it is likely to be the case that many practitioners in the field are looking for some kind of ethical guidance, which could be conveyed in a more accessible format. Science communicators, particularly those within practitioner communities often seek ethical direction in their work from a wide range of other disciplines and professional communities [Medvecky and Leach, 2017]. As such,

the edited collection appeared to miss an opportunity to draw together more explicitly and practically, some ethical framings for the field of science communication as it continues to expand, and in some areas, contract.

A further potential missed opportunity within the collection is illustrated by the following quote: 'I have met quite a number of scientists who see science communication as a strategy for getting others "on their side" and yet at the same time they seem to feel that the information they have to offer is (or should be) entirely neutral. This is a deep tension in the field of science communication, but one that is not commonly recognised or discussed; neither scholars nor practitioners commonly question whether it is possible to do both — nor how often one sometimes masquerades as the other.' [Priest, 2018, p. 63] Whilst somewhat addressed in chapters which touched upon strategic motivations for communication, it seemed an oversight that such an important and overlooked point, and one which frequently comes to bear in practical science communication settings, was not considered further within the edited collection. Sarah Davies chapter, examining motivations scientists express in their efforts to communicate, perhaps comes closest to unpicking this further, but with a primarily practical focus, this chapter is likely to be more informative to practitioners or researchers who are interested in working with scientists on their communication efforts, than providing a firmly rooted answer to such a difficult challenge.

The nature of an edited collection that draws in authors who are mainly based in North America, is that many of the examples included provide a somewhat westernised perspective, and as already stated, focussed on examples of scientific controversy which have been particularly dominant in the countries in which many of the authors are based. In a similar manner, the edited collection had only the occasional focus on social and digital media, which at times meant the collection did appear to feel less contemporary, in terms of the diversity of issues considered and the mechanisms for communication being used.

One of the further difficulties of an edited collection in an area, which has been underexplored, is that there can be a sense of posing questions for which there are only limited answers. Add to this recipe ethics, with its crucial ingredients of morality, values, context and debate and this can lead to a sense, by the end of the book, that it is difficult to reach firm conclusions. Various authors acknowledge this uncertainty throughout, and the editors themselves refer to 'loose ends'. However, in shining a light on some of the ethical questions currently concerning the field of science communication, this enjoyable and detailed selection of chapters draws together a number of key examples and authors, to begin to consider such ethical quandaries, as well as identifying spaces, which are primed for further ethical exploration in the future.

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