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Climate Change Blog

As a science journalist covering climate change, it is often challenging to engage the audience, educate the public, and report the facts without interjecting opinion, politics, or economics.

According to Kris Wilson, an international expert in the communication of climate change science, the journalist's job is to find sources, tell the story, and be true to the science.

When Wilson began researching how people in the United States learn about climate change, he decided to focus on the role of the TV weatherman.

He realized that once people graduate from college, they become disconnected from science and understand less about the environmental impacts on their lives.

"But the environment is all around us," Wilson said. "The environment is where we live – air quality, urban development – all of these things affect the quality of our lives."

Wilson explained that people are in fact interested in the stories, but are often scared away by the jargon and technical science terms. Science stories can be intimidating for both the reader and the journalist, as they are often crowded with many numbers and complicated data.

The journalist must act as a surrogate for the public.

"They must take this information up from the mountain top and share it with the masses," Wilson said. "Helping people understand science plays an important role in our society."

However, the responsibility to enlighten the public about climate change is a challenging one – the journalist must translate complexity without dumbing the story down or projecting favoritism toward a certain perspective.

After speaking with Chris Wilson and reading a few of his articles, I composed a list of lessons I learned about how to deal with the difficulties of covering climate change:

1. Engage the public – It is difficult to take something that is very complex and help the audience understand it, while capturing their attention and interest. In Wilson's article, "Trouble in the Tropics: Communicating the Science of Hurricanes on TV," he attracts the reader with an intriguing title. Wilson emphasizes the importance of understanding your audience. Because he was not writing for a science journal, Wilson wanted to make sure that the audience

understood the point of the article. Engaging headlines are an effective method for persuading the audience to read the article.

2. Master the language – People try to make sense of the world through words. Language is the most important tool of a journalist, and the terminology chosen to describe something affects how an idea is either embraced or rejected. One of the challenges to the public’s understanding of climate change is the language chosen to characterize it. For example, when Wilson was writing his “Trouble in the Tropics” article, he had never heard of the term “SLOSH” (an acronym for hurricane forecasters). But for Wilson, this word was something new and highly sophisticated. Journalists must provide an explanation of confusing terminology, so the reader has a better understanding of the scientific processes.
3. Truth, fairness, and balance – Focus on the facts and evidence and not on advocacy and opinions. Wilson advises that weathercasters and reporters stick to the science rather than diving into the politics surrounding scientific issues. It is not the journalist’s job to provide solutions to climate change, such as increasing energy efficiency to reduce greenhouse emissions. Instead, the journalist must provide the facts, and as Wilson says, “let the people wrestle with it.”

Wilson’s research and advice about reporting on climate change is certainly beneficial for journalists seeking to clarify people’s understanding about this complex scientific process without bias.

In today’s frantic society, it is easy for readers to disengage from an overwhelming scientific story, such as one about climate change. What we must accomplish as journalists is to demonstrate the relevance of such topics so that people understand the significant impact that science issues has on our daily lives.