

Setting a higher standard for (environmental) journalism



An aerial view of the controversial kiosk concrete platforms at Ghadira, the environmental assessment for which Mepa has not released. Photo: <http://airphotomalta.photoshelter.com>

Let me start this article with a proviso. Being a resident academic at University and penning this fortnightly column for the past 13 years means I have a foot in both academia and journalism.

Academics are usually wary or coy, to say the least, of the media, in view of the perceived risk of being misquoted by journalists or of having the message the academics wish to convey being skewed through very selective journalism, which simply cherry-picks the most sensationalist threads from the academic's statements to the media.

The main way by which academics seek to safeguard themselves from a possible dent in their reputation is to insist with journalists that they see the final version of their articles before they are shunted off to the printers.

Some journalists agree to this, although many do not bind themselves to this arrangement in view of the tight publication deadlines that newspapers have and so as not to curtail what journalists perceive as being their sacrosanct right to freedom of expression.

Against this backdrop of mistrust between academics and journalists, which leads to more and more academics shying away from the media and, consequently, in a distorted message being projected to the public, The Conversation was conceived.

This is a collaboration between editors and academics to provide informed news analysis and commentary that's free to read and republish, and offers directly to the public an independent source of news and views, sourced from the academic and research community. Despite the title of this article referring to environmental journalism, The Conversation spans all possible subjects where academics can give a valuable contribution, ranging reform in the education sector to the health effects of cannabis and the dynamics behind Islamic State's rise to power.

The rationale behind the setting up of The Conversation initiative is to provide access to independent, high-quality, authenticated, explanatory journalism, which is essential to promote evidence-based policy-making, which in turn is one of the cornerstones of a vibrant democracy. Putting it simply, taxpayers and voters want the best deal for the money they are pitching in.

So how does The Conversation, launched in Australia in March 2011 and in the UK in 2013, work? Basically, a cohort of professional editors liaise closely with university academics and with research institute members in order to translate the knowledge they hold to the public.

One of the main objectives of the initiative is to reinstate trust in journalism. The Conversation strives towards this goal in a number of ways. For instance, authors and editors sign up to an editorial charter. All contributors to the online discussion must abide by a community standards policy (available at <https://theconversation.com/uk/community-standards>).

Authors are only allowed to write on topics on which they have proven expertise, which they must disclose alongside their article. Authors' funding and potential conflicts of interest must also be disclosed. Failure to do so carries a risk of being banned from contributing to the site.

The initiative also promotes open, unfettered access to information, with the facility of freely republishing all articles carried on the portal as long as a number of guidelines are followed.

The Conversation is managed by a non-profit educational foundation and is supported by over 20 UK universities and a number of Australian universities and research institutes. It is financially propped up by a number of foundations in the two countries, and its site does not carry any overt or covert advertising.

The closest Malta get to the standards in journalism The Conversation wants to instil is Think magazine (www.um.edu.mt/think), edited by Edward Duca and published by the University of Malta, which features articles shedding light on ongoing research projects at the University and which are jointly compiled by academics and journalists.

The locally-based Tumas Fenech Foundation for Environmental Journalism could potentially also take a leaf from The Conversation initiative in overseeing a similar approach here in Malta by journalists and academics, if not formal adherence to the initiative.

For further information about The Conversation initiative, visit <https://theconversation.com/uk> .

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International jellyfish workshop

Last week I had the privilege of co-organising an international workshop on jellyfish blooms in Cadiz, Spain, as part of the Policy-oriented Marine Environmental Research in the Southern European Seas (Perseus) project, which brought together numerous world-renowned experts on the subject.

Presentations at the workshop addressed issues such as the impact of offshore platforms on jellyfish populations, molecular genetics of jellyfish species, the development of jellyfish dispersion and forecasting models and the global correlation between anthropogenic activities and blooming of the same species.

As an outcome, the workshop participants forwarded a common set of recommendations to steer future research on jellyfish blooms. These included the inclusion of jellyfish monitoring in existing monitoring initiatives in fisheries and bathing quality, and the need to use innovative technological equipment to track jellyfish in extreme environments, such as towed cameras in the deep (It is speculated, for example, that the mauve stinger can descend down to canyons that are over 1,000 metres deep).

Perseus is a research project that assesses the dual impact of human activity and natural pressures on the Mediterranean and Black Seas. The project, which ends in December, merges natural and socio-economic sciences to predict the long-term effects of these pressures on marine ecosystems. The project aims to design an effective and innovative research governance framework, which will provide the basis for policymakers to reverse marine life degradation.

The full proceedings of the workshop will be available from the project website below in the coming weeks. As part of the same project, the University has been entrusted to organise a stakeholder training course in Malta in September on issues related to the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. More details about this event will be announced in due course.

The local Spot the Jellyfish campaign (www.ioikids.net/jellyfish), which will run for the sixth consecutive summer this year, through the support of the MTA, Blue Flag, Sharklab and Nature Trust, contributes its jellyfish data to the Perseus project databases. The official launch of the jellyfish spotting campaign for this summer will take place in the coming weeks.

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