

Dawson: To review or not to review: Scientific practice, journalistic ethics collide

Jenn Dawson, Science Editor August 22, 2024



Editor's Note: This content reflects the views of the individual author only and does not represent a stance taken by The Collegian or its editorial board.

Most writers understand what they're getting into when they pick a beat. Breaking news is fast and furious; entertainment and culture needs events and variety; and sports does whatever it is sports do. But a STEM kid wandering away from the highly predictable world of research and into science journalism is facing a chaotic new challenge mostly devoid of peer review, ultraefficient systems and the comfort of absolute facts.

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Continuing science education is usually focused on following meticulous directions and connecting the preformed dots. Meanwhile, the artistic counterparts endeavor to cause others to think differently. Many people see the values of art and science as compatible as oil and water, which makes science journalism an alarmingly paradoxical task.

Soon after we first launched the science desk, I stumbled across a strange dilemma that is seemingly unique to the enigma that is science journalism: peer review versus prior review.

This distinction should be a lot more obvious than I — psychology major, journalism minor — made it look last year while hurriedly drafting an article about concussions.

While no self-respecting reporter asks a source for feedback on how their own quote is phrased, no self-respecting scientist publishes without consultation from every contributor. Where a reporter must be protective of their content to deter bias, scientists operate on full transparency. To grossly oversimplify scientific peer review: If everyone in your field agrees that you are right, then you are probably right.

So like a total journalistic plebe, I invited a source to check their wordings from our interview as a protection against misinformation on a sensitive topic. Then I casually mentioned this to our editor in chief only hours before the paper was to be sent to print.

The story had to be cut because prior review is a conflict of interest. In general, journalists should not have sources or anyone else other than their editors review their articles before they are published, as sources' changes can introduce bias. Checking specific quotes and details is fine, but only the writer and their editors should make decisions on the content of the article as a whole.

Since the absolute chaos of that production day, I've paid especially close attention to journalistic fact-checking and how this industry has designed a system that serves both ethics and accuracy — when done correctly. The Collegian's editorial staff has patiently guided me through a whole year of weird questions, ethical quandaries and rookie mistakes. Our copy desk and fact-checkers are our unsung heroes, and I have something new to learn from them every week.

There are ways to control for misinformation that don't blur the lines between peer and prior review, but considering the current state of turbulence between researchers, science communicators and news consumers, I believe some situations ought to demand special attention to accidental misinformation. Usually, only an individualized expert is able to catch misunderstandings of their own science.

On this side of the newsroom, my choice of phrasing could impact a researcher's career, and that fact is remarkably salient to our potential expert sources. All too often, experts dodge interview requests because even skilled communicators are highly likely to misinterpret or overabbreviate their work. I've spoken with scientists who worry about the integrity of their research so much that they believe that no connection to the media is worth the risk.

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From that perspective, prior review seems simply respectful. Such author-source transparency could build a world of trust between scientists and the 8 billion people who need to understand what they have to say.

Scientists are not exactly your typical news source. An academic researcher has abnormally large personal and professional stakes in articles that include them, and that causes predictable hesitation when we approach experts for interviews.

Scientists feel burned by the media in a similar way that consumers feel misled after our recent history of rapid-fire public health communication blunders. But before public mistrust of science became so potent, researchers were already skeptical of journalists and their knack for oversimplification to the point of misinformation.

No one wants to be the next victim of a disinformation campaign birthed from a poorly communicated article. Add student journalists to the conversation, and we can't deny that expert's assumptions of our inexperience are even more accurate.

Our desk would be so lucky to ever participate in something that could so meaningfully impact the public perception of science. But because there are journalists out in the world who do have exactly that kind of power, prior review within science reporting might be a conversation worth having.

Maybe expert sources could become contributing authors, or perhaps we will garner enough expert participation to offer sources a true peer review before publishing our interpretation of their work. In the meantime, we face a constant lack of expert support, and we carry a healthy fear of misguiding readers in every article.

So how can we gain meaningful experience in science reporting while rebuilding trust between our sources, our writers and our readers?

While offering prior review to sources is an ethical no-go, we can instead summarize the important points and ask sources to fact-check specific details of their work. I also encourage my writers to participate in off-the-record conversations with experts for the sake of their own education and understanding of the topic. Many professors are happy to show students their work even if they're not interested in being quoted for an article. Sometimes, writers are able to build a relationship with researchers so that they eventually become willing to participate in our reporting or refer us to other scientists who may be more enthusiastic.

Ideally, as a science editor in a science-denying world, I am looking for opportunities to deliberate with scientists and journalists together about ethics, best-practices and compromises to the status quo. Because science journalism is in such flux, what better time and place is there to explore possibilities and problem-solve industry concerns than right here at college?

Reach Jenn Dawson at science@collegian.com or on Twitter @CSUCollegian.

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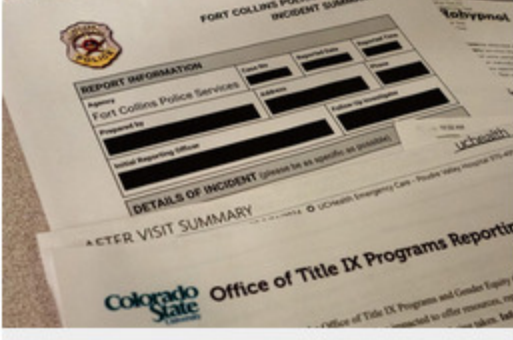
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Jenn Dawson, Science Editor

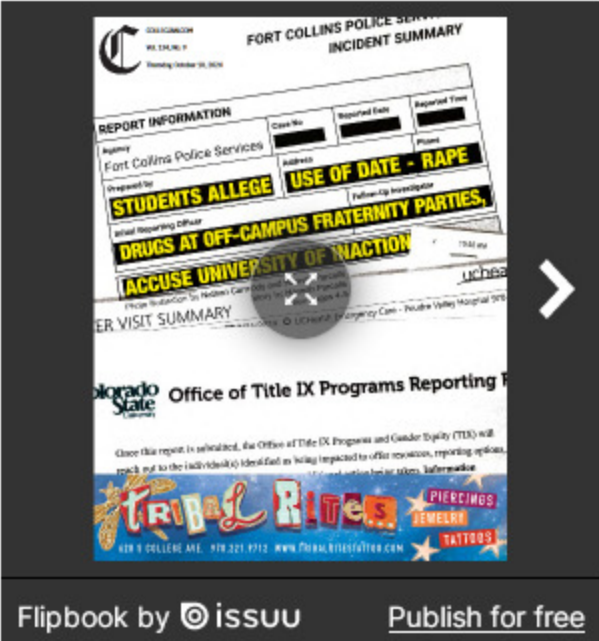
Jenn Dawson's audacious plan to change the world involves brain sciences, data and science communication, investigative journalism and community education. This plan stands alongside strong notes of ethics, justice, persistence and inclusion, with subtle hints of comedy, music and family. With the help of her nontraditional journey through education, Dawson aims to use her future degrees in psychology and journalism to seek the truth and share what she learns. There's no better way to get started doing just that than having the privilege of starting The Collegian's first-ever science desk. On the rare occasion that project and assignment due dates are not imminent, Dawson likes to play Dungeons & Dragons and video games; forage and take photos in the mountains; enjoy Fort Collins; and play music. Dawson's other focuses are advocacy oriented, and she's always on the lookout for the most effective ways to support the causes she cares for the most. She loves participating in local organizations and community projects. Notably, Dawson is excited to work with the Northern Colorado Deliberative Journalism Project, a local media collaboration with a goal to reconsider the nature of journalism.



Trin Bonner, Illustration Director

Trin Bonner is the illustration editor for The Collegian newspaper. This will be her fourth year in the position, and she loves being a part of the creative and amazing design team of The Collegian. As the illustration editor, Bonner provides creative insight and ideas that bring the newspaper the best graphics and illustrations possible. She loves working with artists to develop fun and unique weekly illustrations for readers. She enjoys helping the illustrators on her desk explore and expand their artistic abilities as well as challenge their skills with every edition. Bonner is a senior studying graphic design and electronic art and is also a community coordinator for Aggie Village Apartments on Colorado State University's campus. She finds immense joy in illustration and comic creation. She hopes to explore more in the realm of graphic design and video game design as she approaches the end of her undergraduate experience. Trin spends her free time crocheting, doing beadwork and playing guitar when she's not working on illustrations or acting as community coordinator, though she spends much of her free time sketching and brainstorming her next webcomic. Bonner finds that making people laugh and smile through her art is incredibly fulfilling and is excited to continue to bring her love for illustration and art to The Collegian.

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