Math and Writing: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

Anuraag Bukkuri

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" was definitely not an easy question for me to answer when I was a kid. My quest for the answer has taken me on an exhilarating journey that has not yet come to an end. I was inspired by the words of Poe, the works of Euclid, and the adventures of Darwin. I wanted to do it all!

By the time I entered college, I decided to study mathematics and biology. I poured over books and papers on topics from ancient human fossils to cutting-edge medical research, from the esoteric realms of infinity-category theory to the practical applications of harmonic analysis. And I loved every minute of it.

My passion for writing, however, was relegated to a side-hobby at best, with a few miscellaneous poems scribbled in the margins of my organic chemistry notes. Something was missing. Something was incomplete.

As I started graduate school, I vowed to rekindle my writing activities. Amidst the never-ending deluge of seminars, papers, and conferences, I discovered the critical need for scientists to share their knowledge and excitement about science with the public. Realizing that I could use my communication skills to fill this need, I dove headfirst into the world of science writing.

I began writing for outlets such as *The Conversation*, explaining how ecology and evolution could help us tackle the biggest problems in cancer, and for the journal *Evolution*, summarizing and synthesizing the latest developments in evolutionary biology and ecology to a lay audience. It was a blast and the engagement I got from my audiences was addicting.

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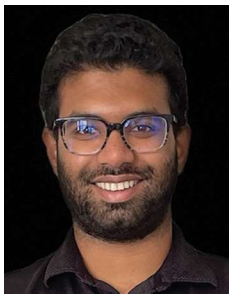
When I learned about the AAAS Mass Media Science and Engineering Fellowship, I knew I had to apply. I was elated to discover that I had been chosen for the fellowship by the American Mathematical Society and placed at a local newspaper, *The Miami Herald*, where I'd be working as a health reporter for the summer. But I was wholly unprepared for what was to come.

The summer approached quickly, and I was soon immersed in the world of science journalism. I was calling local health officials about expanding vaccine and testing sites, analyzing the latest COVID and monkeypox trends, and speaking to medical experts and political pundits about the effects of the Roe v. Wade decision. But most importantly, I was reaching out to members of the South Florida community to understand their questions and concerns.

Many of the articles I wrote at the *Miami Herald* were in response to such queries: How can I track COVID trends in Florida? What are the symptoms of monkeypox and how can I get tested? Others were more detailed explainers about the impacts of the overturning of Roe v. Wade on medical care, the effects of the new COVID variant and the monkeypox virus, and what the government is doing about the monkeypox vaccine shortage. And yet others chronicled the stories of a trauma surgeon who went to work on war victims in Ukraine, or a summer camp for kids with cancer.

Each of these articles had a life of its own. Some were sad. Some were angry. Some were hopeful. But all of them were important for the members of the South Florida community. They gave the opportunity for a woman to open up, for the first time, about her lived experience with cancer. And for a man to express his frustration over the health inequities he's faced and the abrupt cancellation of his vaccine appointment.

As I return to graduate school, I will bring back with me many of the lessons I learned during my time as an AAAS/AMS Mass Media fellow. Namely, the ability to write quickly and effectively, construct compelling and thorough arguments, and find novel questions or unique angles on well-studied problems are all skills that will make me a better scientist. And although I plan to remain in academia, doing the work I love with colleagues and students that inspire me, science writing and communication will always be an integral part of who I am and what I do.



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Credits

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