



## OPINION

### *“The only way is Wikipedia”*

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In a world in which anti-science appears to be on the increase, it is imperative that scientists improve how they engage with the general public about their research. A traditional way to do this is to give talks at science fairs and engage directly with schools. A problem with this ‘standard’ public engagement approach, however, is that the reach can be quite limited and is often a case of preaching to the converted.

Of course, if your research is ‘hot’ enough you can push stories through the mass media, such as TV and newspapers, hoping that the results don’t get too garbled in the telling. I believe that these limitations, combined with the fact that many of these activities are time-consuming, inhibit many scientists from communicating effectively with the public.

If you really want to let the public know about your science then the only way is Wikipedia. For better or worse, Wikipedia has become the central repository of knowledge on the internet. If you don’t believe me then try the following experiment. Pick a word and type it into Google. For most terms – e.g. ‘malaria’, ‘research’ or ‘opinion’ – Wikipedia is the top hit.

If you want to get a quick overview of a topic, it’s likely you’ll go straight to Wikipedia. Now

think about the hundreds of millions of internet users out there who will, at some point, want to find out something about science, technology or medicine. I’m afraid that they will almost certainly not be heading to your latest research article to do so.

Editing Wikipedia can seem daunting at first. Some researchers might be put off because their first impulse is to tackle editing an article there the same way as they would write a research paper – perfect it and then let others review it before final publication. Wikipedia doesn’t work that way. You don’t need to rewrite the history of a science article, just add a sentence here, a reference there. You can make a useful contribution to Wikipedia without making a large investment of your time.

So if you are interested in helping the public understand what your research is all about then I urge you to learn how to edit and improve Wikipedia. Find the relevant article and make whatever changes you think are needed to ensure that the content is scientifically accurate and up to date. It doesn’t take a lot to make a big difference, and you get to fulfil some of your public engagement responsibilities in the process too.

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[www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)