'The Conversation' returns to the University of Arizona

University Communications
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The public has access to more information today than at any other point in history. That access, while largely positive, has been accompanied by a sharp increase in disinformation, as well.

How does a conscientious consumer of news differentiate between valuable information and dangerous misinformation? That is just one of the many goals for the writers and editors involved with The Conversation[^1], a nonprofit, independent news organization dedicated to unlocking the knowledge of university researchers and scholars for the public good. The Conversation seeks to publish trustworthy and informative articles written by academic experts for the general public and edited by their team of journalists and higher education communications professionals.

Representatives from The Conversation will be visiting the University of Arizona campus Oct. 19-20 to discuss several new initiatives and opportunities, including a strengthened relationship with The Associated Press, expanded multimedia opportunities and the formation of a breaking news desk.

"We believe that we have a unique opportunity to provide a service of real value to the public," said Michelle McAdams, university relationship manager for The Conversation. "Judging by the response most of our articles receive, it's clear that the public truly values clear, research-based writing that can help make sense of our increasingly complex world."

Founded in Australia in March 2011, The Conversation has grown to publish editions in the United States, Africa, Canada, France, Indonesia, New Zealand, Spain and the United Kingdom.

The U.S. edition, which was founded in 2014, includes more than 75 member universities, including the University of Arizona. In these eight years, University of Arizona authors have generated more than 12.7 million reads across more than 150 articles spanning several disciplines and fields of study. University of Arizona scholars and researchers have published more than 100 articles in the last three years alone.

**Shifting strategies during COVID-19**

The Conversation shifted its strategies and expanded its reach amid the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Bruce Wilson, chief innovation and development officer, approximately 200-250 news outlets used content from The Conversation each month prior to 2020. Today, more than 400 outlets are running articles written by authors with The Conversation.

"We have at least one newspaper in all 50 states using our content," Wilson said.

Through a Creative Commons license, The Conversation distributes articles at no charge to news organizations across the globe. Their editors pay particular attention to strengthening news organizations that are under-resourced – particularly those in rural areas.

According to McAdams, the pandemic created a situation where this kind of expert analysis was more important than ever before.

"Prior to the pandemic, our mission was to take the rich academic research happening at colleges and universities and help bring it outside the bubble of academia to the general public that might not have had access to all of this valuable information," McAdams said. "Once COVID hit, it truly became a top priority for us to fight the rampant misinformation by taking the perspectives and research of the true experts in the field and getting that expertise to the public as quickly and clearly as possible – especially early in the pandemic, when so much was uncertain."

In fact, the University of Arizona's most widely read article came at the height of the pandemic's confusing early days. Published May 22, 2020, "**Should you fly yet? An epidemiologist and an exposure scientist walk you through the decision process**"[^2] has generated more than 1.37 million reads across 50 publishers, including CNN, Business Insider and the TED Talks "Ideas" website. In the article, Kacey Ernst, a professor of epidemiology and biostatistics, and Paloma Beamer, a professor of environmental sciences, teamed up to explain their thought process on what to consider and how to minimize one's risks during air travel.

"We worked with a fantastic editor, who assisted us in revising our work to be more user-friendly and assisted in flow," Ernst said.

Both Ernst and Beamer, researchers with the Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health, said they experienced a significant **upick in interview requests**[^3], and Beamer – who also co-wrote a popular article on **hotel/rental property safety**[^4] amid the pandemic – was invited to participate in a live Q&A on Zoom with The Conversation.

"I was really impressed with how they were able to let us stick to our message," Beamer said.
The Conversation didn't solely rely on public health scholars and medical researchers to help combat COVID-19 misinformation. Ute Lotz-Heumann, who holds the Heiko A. Oberman Chair in Late Medieval and Reformation History and is director of the Division for Late Medieval and Reformation Studies, saw an opportunity to show how the modern pandemic bore striking similarities to the bubonic plague outbreak that struck in the mid-17th century.

Lotz-Heumann's piece, "**Diary of Samuel Pepys shows how life under the bubonic plague mirrored today’s pandemic**"[9], has compiled more than 258,000 reads since its publication on April 24, 2020. It gave readers around the world a new way to think about not only about the immediate impacts of the pandemic, but their place in history.

"I had written a long-ish piece and he (editor Nick Lehr) trimmed it to a manageable length, edited my style and just made it all work. It really was a great collaboration," Lotz-Heumann said. "I very much appreciated that I was able to approve every change he made."

**How to get involved**

According to The Conversation's 2022 author impact report[6], 93% of 659 authors surveyed said they had a positive experience working with their editors and were very likely to recommend writing for The Conversation to a colleague.

Researchers and scholars who have yet to write for The Conversation are encouraged to [submit a pitch][7], before sending a finished article.

"We love research-based stories that debunk a commonly held knowledge or belief," McAdams said. "If a scholar has new research that is surprising or changes the way an average reader thinks about the world around them, that is an added bonus."

**Chris Impey**, University Distinguished Professor of Astronomy, has authored 19 articles for The Conversation, which have generated a combined 3 million reads and more than 1,100 comments. He is among The Conversation's most prolific writers.

"For an academic, its useful to have the discipline of an 800-word limit and working with an editor to make sure the article is free of jargon," Impey said. "The time from pitching an idea to publication has ranged for me from a leisurely two months to a blindingly fast two days."

Impey encourages anyone who is interested to "jump in and do it," because he considers writing these articles to be an "important part of my public outreach as a scientist."

Articles that are heavy in academic or research jargon, or that don't appeal to a wider audience, aren't likely to be published, according to McAdams, because the purpose of the articles is to "connect with the widest audience possible."

Beamer encourages interested writers to think about why their perspective is "unique compared to others that may be pitching ideas to them on the same topic," and Ernst urges researchers "to provide your background and why you are an expert in this topic that should be highlighted on the platform."

Those interested in more information on The Conversation are encouraged to attend any of the in-person workshops and information sessions happening on campus Oct. 19-20.

**Wednesday, Oct. 19**

- 9 a.m. – College of Optical Sciences. Meinel Optical Sciences Building, Executive Conference Room 821
- 10 a.m. – College of Humanities and College of Education. Worlds of Words, Room 453
- 11 a.m. – College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. SBS Technical Services, Room 236E
- 1 p.m. – College of Science. Gould Simpson Building, Room 1027
- 2 p.m. – College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Environment and Natural Resources 2 Building, Room S215
- 3 p.m. – Eller College of Management.McClelland Hall, Room 208A

**Thursday, Oct. 20**

- 9 a.m. – College of Engineering, Aerospace and Mechanical Engineering Building, Room N715
- 10 a.m. – College of Fine Arts and College of Architecture, Planning & Landscape Architecture, Music Building, Room 114 (green room)
- 11 a.m. – Department of Psychology, Integrated Learning Center, Room 119
- 2 p.m. – University of Arizona Health Sciences, Thomas W. Keating Bioresearch Building, Room 103
- 3 p.m. – University of Arizona Health Sciences, Health Sciences Innovation Building, Room 995

For additional information and resources, contact Nick Prevenas, director of media relations, at nprevenas@arizona.edu[8].

**Source URL:** https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/lqp/conversation-returns-university-arizona

**Links**