



The Need for a Code of Professional Ethics for Marine Conservation Communicators

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As a crisis sector, marine conservation needs continuous public scrutiny to maintain much-needed transparency, accountability, and to secure public trust. Such opportunities for public scrutiny can be ensured through independent, objective and critical journalism (Johns and Jacquet, 2018). However, mainstream media and other journalistic platforms often rely on communication professionals working at marine conservation groups for information and expertise related to marine conservation issues. It is therefore crucial that communication professionals at conservation groups have a professional code of conduct that encourages dissemination of objective truth about conservation efforts and does not prevent journalists from carrying out their duties to serve the public interest.

In this piece, we elaborate on our opinion that a professional ethical guideline for marine conservation communication is necessary. We also report on discussions from a focus group titled, “Overcoming ethical challenges in marine conservation communication” held at the 5th International Marine Conservation Congress (IMCC5). Sixteen marine conservation professionals (scientists, practitioners, and communicators) shared their perspective about existing relationships and modes of engagement between media, journalists and conservation groups, urgency of factual and accurate narratives in ocean conservation, prerequisites of independent and transparent reporting while promoting conservation efforts, and the inclusion of local and indigenous voices in conservation narratives. Focus group participants discussed solutions-driven directives that could be incorporated into a professional code of conduct for conservation communicators and debated the fundamental premises of such a code.

“Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one” (Liebling, 1964). With the explosion of publishing platforms made possible by the Internet, this quote from Liebling rings truer today than it did in the 1960s. The demise of the journalistic watchdog and the rise of the citizen journalists (Bruns, 2008) have created a dynamic that means it is up to the reader to navigate between professional journalism, irresponsible click-bait, opinion blog posts, and agenda driven articles. Grassroots reporting (blog indexes, personal blogs) and the rise of citizen journalism have created an active audience that not only follows the news, but contributes (Bruns, 2008). The journalistic role of gatekeeping, filtering information before publishing, has diminished, transforming the role instead to gate watcher (Bruns, 2008) or scout in the jungle of information (Brüggemann, 2017), leaving journalists to filter information which is already published. With no dedicated watchdog, open publishing platforms allow everyone with access to the internet to have a voice. This, in turn, is enabling content that is directly or indirectly guided or influenced by those who may carry subjective, agenda-driven intentions, be it an organization, NGO, advertiser, broadcaster, or individual science communicator.

This is blurring the boundaries between environmental journalism and advocacy (Rosenstiel et al., 2016) which we, the authors, believe can have both a positive and negative impact on the way readers understand and interpret marine conservation. In some fields this is allowing more

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TABLE 1 | Suggestions to include in a code of professional ethics for marine conservation communicators.

Suggested guideline	Reference or origin
(A) TRANSPARENCY	
(i) Journalistic works must always be independent, and should not be influenced by funding or other benefits, gifts, favors	Adapted from the Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics (2014)
(ii) Commissioned articles, or those in return for free travel, favors, extended reach, etc., (from influencers, bloggers, writers) should clearly state that they are sponsored content	Federal Trade Commission's Endorsement Guides, 2017
(iii) Ensure correct attribution of content and images. Respect the rules of quoting	SPJ
(B) BOUNDARIES	
(i) Take a proactive role in enabling journalists to maintain its editorial independence while working as a partner in conservation	IMCC5 Focus Group Discussions
(ii) Accept that you may not have access to the final copy of a journalistic article before it is published, but offer to review/fact-check sections that may be complex	Adapted from Borel et al. (2018)
(iii) Accept that your activities and projects are subject to public scrutiny and accountability through the mainstream media	IMCC5
(C) ENABLING SCIENTIFIC LITERACY	
(i) Support scientists and project leaders to engage directly with media, provide media training	IMCC5; Ocean Media Institute, 2019; Stempira guide to being a media officer, 2019
(ii) Provide access to information by publishing research in open access journals if possible or make clear that you can share copies of papers	IMCC5
(iii) Suggest other reliable resources where possible. Provide outlets for further action or more information	IMCC5
(iv) Take responsibility for the accuracy of the work	Adapted from SPJ
(v) Explore and engage other disciplines in your work to create a richer, more inclusive story e.g., marine science, social science, history	IMCC5; Savoie, 2017
(vi) Craft a story of the science that engages our humanity. In order to be effective, the science narrative can no longer simply inform; it must engage the public by incorporating human agency into the story	Savoie, 2017
(D) ACCURACY AND HONESTY	
(i) Ask yourself if you have exaggerated the significance of your work/findings or if there are other possible interpretations of results	Stempira, 2019
(ii) You may need to use an attention grabbing headline, but commit to including the nuance and context and reality in the rest of the article	Stempira, 2019
(iii) Ask yourself if your personal beliefs have influenced your interpretation of the science	Authors
(iv) Communicate negative as well as positive impacts	ISEAL
(v) Research that has not been peer-reviewed, replicated, or carefully vetted should not be the primary basis of content	IMCC5
(vi) Embrace an approach to science communication that is genuinely evidence-based to minimize polarization	Kahan, 2014
(vii) Think carefully about the use of visual representations so that they convey the meaning you intend	Authors
(viii) Acknowledge the technological limitations in different parts of the world and consider how it may impact your ability to follow-up and fully communicate a story	Authors
(E) DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION	
(i) A local community must be more than a story or data provider to a foreign NGO. Provide a platform for the underrepresented, yet critical voice. Include local and/or indigenous perspectives whenever possible	IMCC5; Aini and West, 2018
(ii) Approach scientific knowledge and indigenous knowledge not as mutually exclusive competing ideas, but as complimentary	Authors
(iii) Embrace diversity (racial, sexual, cultural, gender, age) in storytelling	Adapted from SPJ
(F) INSPIRING ACTION	
(i) Doom and gloom does little to motivate audiences to fully invest in an issue. Point audience toward models of hope and success, even when communicating negative results	Balmford and Knowlton, 2017
(ii) Where appropriate, pair the conservation issue with positive solutions-driven action and/or a call to action	Dyer, 2015

extensive reporting on events such as climate conferences (Rosenstiel et al., 2016), yet it is also creating the opportunity for self-promotion, which depending on the agenda of the writer, can pose threats to the public's objective understanding of marine conservation and the issues facing the planet.

Recently, an opinion piece published in the New York Times discussed the trend of "just add water" that is seeing

the triumphant announcement of large marine protected areas, which are protecting relatively empty waters as opposed to prioritizing coastal habitats that are home to 25% of all marine species (Rocha, 2018). While this opinion is not shared by all scientists (MacPherson, 2018), others (Barnes et al., 2018) stress the need to report outcomes as opposed to area when it comes to announcing new protected areas, arguing that the focus

should be on anticipated biodiversity gains rather than the square kilometers protected. The root of this problem may, in fact, lie with the issuer of the original press release (e.g., an NGO) or the opinion piece may have been politically motivated. Crucially, there is an issue of transparency which needs to be improved from both sides: the source (the issuer of the press release) and the entity covering the story.

Another difficulty is simply distinguishing between science journalism—a responsibility to inform and educate the public (Xu, 2013), assess, critique and contextualize science and scientists rather than promote it (Borel, 2015), and science communication, which explains how a natural phenomenon works or describes “the how” of new scientific discoveries. The important difference is that how science communicators portray their topic depends on their intentions, which should be transparent (Borel, 2015). Xu argues that the ability for scientists to publish directly to the general public, without going through the official publishing process, is creating a new “science-media ecosystem.” Though a direct link between scientists and the public can be beneficial, journalist Brooke Borel highlights the importance of journalistic scrutiny in questioning the intentions of scientists or organizations publishing their own scientific outreach (Borel, 2015).

While some argue that we are in an “Unlikely Golden Age” at the height of production in terms of both quantity and quality of science and environmental journalism (Hayden and Check Hayden, 2018), we believe that despite this, there is a lack of capacity when it comes to reporting on marine conservation. An example is a recent article by The Guardian (Summers, 2018) which reports on a new scientific study concerning a controversial whale shark tourism site in the Philippines (which one of the authors and her team studies). The journalist reports only one side of the controversy, omitting all previous research from the same study site, and fails to include an outside quote. The article also reported illegal activity which lacked original sources.

The implications of poorly executed journalism such as this are far reaching. They can miseducate the public on complex topics and undermine conservation efforts. Are journalists at capacity and not able to dedicate their full time to covering marine conservation, similar to that of other environmental journalists (Detjen et al., 2000)? Or are there simply too few experts, with only a small group of journalists producing the vast majority of coverage (Brüggemann and Engesser, 2014)? Either way, how can this knowledge gap be moderated?

Communication professionals in NGOs can mitigate a lack of journalistic capacity in the marine conservation space if they commit to balanced, transparent self-reporting, and to help independent and objective reporting. However, this is not always the case. Mongabay’s 2016 *Conservation, Divided* series highlighted that the biggest NGOs often issue “press releases that could convince a misanthrope to love people [and] make whatever they do sound like a resounding success, even when the reality is much more complex” (Hance, 2016). Biased self-reporting can also be off-putting for donors. A recent analysis commissioned by ISEAL, the global best practice community of standard setters, found that funders are more likely to believe

communications that contain negative as well as positive impact (Chilvers, 2017). This suggests there is an opportunity for professional marine conservation communicators to contribute to objective reporting while improving relationships with key partners.

Finally, whether or not coverage of marine conservation efforts is the result of sponsored or embedded arrangements (e.g., a journalist given access to a remote marine location through an NGO sponsorship), conservation communicators must permit journalistic contents to be produced independently with objectivity and independence needed in the persuasion of the truth.

We believe there is a need for a code of professional ethics for marine conservation communicators that promotes trust, accountability, independence, and solutions-based reporting, all the while furthering the value of a compelling story. These guidelines (Table 1) draw together existing resources as well as emerging areas of focus and can be used as a tool by communication practitioners and scientists to create a professional ethics code, but can also be adopted by journalists and other content creators. Acknowledging the limitations of our own knowledge and the small sample size of opinions collated, we present them not as a final or comprehensive list, but as a starting point for much needed future collaborative work in this space.

In conclusion, no matter how much conservation groups have sway over social media and public relation platforms, those are not a replacement for independent journalism. While we should continue to strongly advocate for conservation, we should not make it difficult for journalists to inform the debate with facts and a commitment to making all voices heard. We hope this article will spark a conversation about the necessity of a code of professional ethics for marine conservation communicators.

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MU conceived the idea and scope of problem. GS, LE, MU, and SS devised main conceptual ideas and designed the article. SS and LE took notes at the focus group discussion. All authors provided critical feedback and contributed to develop the final manuscript.

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