Online science campaign to inspire the next generation of African scientists

Mahmoud Maina
(University of Sussex)

We can often assume that the importance of science to our lives and in driving societal developmental is obvious to most people. However, there is a high level of cultural and religious misconception about science in Africa. In Nigeria, Africa’s most populous nation, science literacy is extremely low, partly due to the near absence of science communication by scientists, which itself could be partly linked to low government support for science. In schools, many science teachers lack equipment for science teaching and do not employ alternative innovative teaching approaches.

As such, many students never develop a passion for science. In trying to tackle the situation, I founded the TReND (Teaching and Research in Natural Sciences for Development in Africa) Outreach Programme in 2013 which currently has over 90 scientists across Africa engaged in science communication (http://trendinafrica.org/activities/outreach/) (Fig. 1). Since 2013, I have run several outreach events in Nigeria and Uganda to inspire students about science and enhance public trust and support for science. Interestingly, my first funding for these activities was from the Biochemical Society in 2015, which really helped in securing subsequent support from other societies. Through these activities, I came to meet and interact with nearly a thousand students and also learned that many often see scientific innovation as a thing of the West, partly because of the lack of visible science role models or stories of science driven by African scientists.

In Nigeria, online news has become a popular media for news access. This is partly due to increasing accessibility to mobile phones which mostly have internet capabilities. With a population of over 170 million, Nigeria currently has about 100 million mobile internet users. To leverage on this for the benefit of science, in January 2018 I founded Science Communication Hub Nigeria (SciComNigeria – https://www.scicomnigeria.org/) to promote science in Nigeria and Africa online via four main pathways:

1) Science Stories of Nigerian scientists, not only to inspire aspiring scientists but allow their stories to be celebrated by the public. The stories depict passion for science, success and challenges in the pursuit of science about aspiring, emerging or established scientists (Fig. 2). A story published about an emerging scientist’s journey from a Nigerian public school to the UK for science had over 500 website views a few days after publication.

2) Articles and Interviews about scientific research aimed at a non-specialist audience to inform and dispell misconceptions about science. The articles are
contributed by scientists on relevant science to the society. For example, following a publication of news by Daily Mail about Sugar intake and Alzheimer’s disease, it became a subject of discussion among many Nigerians on social media. In response, I wrote an article titled “Sugar Intake Enhances The Risk For Alzheimer’s Disease – Should Nigerians Be Worried?” to further enlighten the public about the risks in a Nigerian context.

3) "Ask A Scientist" - a radio programme on a local radio station in which scientists are invited to talk about their research and respond to questions from the audience. In addition to connecting with the audience, this enables scientists to showcase the importance of their work to the society through radio, which is the dominant platform for news in Nigeria.

4) "Meet A Scientist". Unlike in many countries, especially in the “Global North”, in Africa, accessibility to scientists is often difficult. Most institutions do not have an accessible website with details of scientists for prospective students to contact, or for collaborators or members of the public to identify. Inspired by the resource developed by 500 Women Scientists (https://500womenscientists.org/), the “Meet A Scientist” pathway enables website visitors to search for Nigerian scientists based on their institution or area of research, this way, making scientists visible and accessible in Nigeria.

Social media has become a very popular platform for communication, networking and engagement among people across the globe. In Nigeria, young adults typically have ~2-5k Facebook followers. While the older generation mostly read the print news, and listen to radio and TV programmes. Indeed, in a recent survey I conducted in Nigeria, about 40% of respondents said they would love to learn more about science via social media and radio. Therefore, to enable broader engagement, the content of SciComNigeria and recorded version of the radio programme (via SoundCloud) are linked to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (all at "sicommigeria"), with a combined reach of about 9000 fans). Through this, the contents are promoted to thousands of Nigerians and the efficacy of engagement are measured by post “likes”, “shares”, “clicks” and “comments”. In addition, on social media, fans are further engaged in science via science quizzes, facts and news, among others things.

Seven months since the commencement of this project, over 30 science stories and articles have been published, 5 radio programmes organised and thus far a database containing over 30 scientists have been generated to enable students, journalists and the general public to identify people of science in Nigeria.

The outreach grant from the Biochemical Society has greatly helped in funding the radio programmes and social media promotions of the published contents of SciComNigeria. Indeed, the published content on the website has thus far had over 5000 views and on social media and over 220, 000 people have been engaged (Fig. 3). Of the social media engagement, about 11% were organic but only when the content was initially promoted, suggesting that once posts were promoted, more audience become engaged even after the lifetime of the promotion.

Interestingly, we find that young adults of 13 – 34 years generally engage and visit the website content more than adults of 35 – 64 years, who seem to have
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For full details on the criteria and more information on how to apply, please visit bit.ly/SummerVacationStudentship or contact education@biochemistry.org

The deadline for applications is 22 February 2019.

SciComNigeria – selected resources referred to in the article

Scientists’ Stories
- https://www.scicomnigeria.org/inspiringstories

Articles and Interviews
- https://www.scicomnigeria.org/articles
- https://www.scicomnigeria.org/ask-a-scientist
- https://www.scicomnigeria.org/meet-a-nigerian-scientist

Meet a Scientist
https://www.scicomnigeria.org/meet-a-nigerian-scientist

Social Media
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/SciComNigeria/
Twitter: https://twitter.com/SciComNigeria
Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/scicomnigeria/
SoundCloud: https://soundcloud.com/user-546341806

Acknowledgement
I would like to thank TREND in Africa and School of Lifesciences, University of Sussex, Brighton, for their support for this project. I would also like to thank Katy Petherick, the Public Engagement Coordinator for the School of Lifesciences for her continued support of the project.

I am a Postdoctoral Fellow in Sussex Neuroscience studying neurodegeneration. I obtained my BSc in Human Anatomy from the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria, MSc in Cellular and Molecular Neuroscience and PhD in Neuroscience, both at the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK. When I am not in the lab, I would be found somewhere passionately promoting and communicating science for which I was awarded the Royal Society of Biology Science Communication Award in 2017.