

WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE PUBLIC?

Jan Erik Frantsvåg

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This question has popped up in my mind a number of times, also quite recently, when I've heard scientists talk about their publications and their audience. Time and again, the public is mentioned as – at best – an audience that is uninteresting for the scientist. Sometimes, albeit rarely, one is left with an impression that the public should have been actively barred from access to what scientists write.

A general attitude seems to be that the scientist writes for a specific group of people, people he (scientists are often male, hence I'll use he/him when writing here) knows by name and corresponds with regularly. All others just aren't of interest to him.

Such an attitude goes very badly with Open Access thinking, where maximum access for the maximum number of readers is the goal. Of course, one has to recognize that a scientific publication generally has other scientists as its primary audience. But there are other audiences, e.g. students at various levels in the same field. And there is probably a large number of scientists out there that the author doesn't know – and there are future scientists, that he cannot know.

Having fellow scientists as the primary audience is a rule that should not be quite without exceptions. E.g. there are a number of large-scale health studies going on in Norway, among them the Tromsø Study and HUNT. These studies study the life and health of large populations, trying to find health risk factors and what can be done to remedy these risks. Such studies are meaningless if the results are not communicated back to the study objects, in order for them to minimize risks and adopt healthier life strategies. They should be primary targets of communication, and the primary audience for the researchers. Writing for other scientists is, of course, also necessary, but that should be secondary.



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We also hear scientists say that “the public cannot make use of what I write; they don't have the necessary knowledge”. True, many scientific writings are incomprehensible for the layman – but not all of them, this depends on the field of study. Advanced maths is nothing for the amateur, but history and literature may be read by anyone interested enough. And do you need to be competent to be critical to what you read, in order for it to be useful to you? My answer is no, while fellow scientists should be able to be critical there must be room for a “lower level” of readers who only can “consume” what they read.

And the public is not a uniform mass of less educated people – the public contains people with a scientific education in a relevant field but not employed in science; people with training in other fields that enable them to find writings in other fields useful; people who used to work in science (e.g. pensioned off professors); people working in knowledge-intensive industry for whom access to scientific publications is of the utmost importance; practitioners of medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, law etc. – and so on. Of course, any given member of the public will be totally uninterested in, and probably also incapable of, reading any given scientific article. But if one out of 10,000 members of the public can find a publication useful, this is an audience of 500 persons in Norway alone – probably a much larger audience than the intended one. If the publication is in English, the number of possible readers increases by orders of magnitude. Using Open Access techniques to disseminate widely will make access to this information easy for the public, at no extra cost for the author. Isn't this a chance too good to miss?