

## **S2E1: What I had wish I had known before starting science communication**

We're baaaaacckkk!

Hello friends and welcome back to a brand new season of the SciComm Toolkit podcast. I don't know about you but I've missed this, so I am ready to get back to talking science communication with all of you. And I might be biased but this season is jam packed with some gems and I'm so excited to be sharing all of it with you over the next 10 episodes.

In case you are new around here, and wondering who on earth is this woman and what am I letting myself in for by listening to this episode, firstly, welcome to the toolkit family but allow me to explain.

I'm Soph or some of you may know me as Soph talks science. I am a molecular biologist turned science communicator and digital content creator. I created this podcast to give researchers and science communicators, or anyone who wants to talk about science really, all the tools they need to communicate their science with confidence. Whether you are just starting out, want to learn a new skill or level up your scicomm confidence, this show will give you all you need to bring science stories to life. Each season will have 10 episodes where I share tips and lessons from my career in science communication but also I will talk to other fantastic science communicators from across the globe and ask them to share their advice for you on a range of different scicomm topics.

But, that is not all, alongside bonus episodes sprinkled around, every single episode will have an exercise or resource, just something you can do straight away to help you take that next step towards improving all your communication skills in the DIY section of the podcast.

Now that we are all caught up and all on the same page, for this first episode in season 2, I wanted to share something a little bit different. When this episode comes out, it would have been doing science communication for 5 years in many different shapes and forms! From that very first foray, to now doing this as a full time job, a side hustle, an award winning blog, this podcast and bigger and bigger scicomm ambitions, I have learnt a lot along the way and most of that by just trial and error. As I've looked back on what I've done and achieved in science communication so far, there is so much I know now that I wish I had known right at the beginning. And I wanted to share some of that with all of you today in the hope that you can learn from my mistakes.

I am always learning new things and it's a guarantee that there will be plenty more I learn on this path too. I'm already learning so much just from interviewing the fabulous communicators for the podcast, but I wanted to share just 5 of those things today that I wish I had known before I started doing science communication. So, I won't keep you waiting any longer. Let's get to it.

1. Experiment to find out what you want but don't take on every opportunity

So the first thing is that it is important to experiment with science communication, but you don't have to take on every opportunity. There are so many ways you can do science

communication from blogging, podcasting, speaking at festivals to presenting at academic conferences or even writing a research publication. There are always new things that spring up and things are evolving. You might think when you start that you want to do science writing, but then you discover science policy and want to give that a go. You try it out, you don't like it, you go back to writing, or try out something else like podcasting. This experimentation, this discovery, this trial and error is an important part of doing science communication. I'm 5 years in and I'm still figuring out exactly what I want my science communication career to look like. Sure I'm slowly narrowing it down but I'm still trying things out that interest me.

Having said that, I thought that taking on nearly every opportunity that came my way was going to help me take that next step in my scicomm career, help me get to the next level with some more exposure. That is not always the case. There have been opportunities that I have taken on over the past 5 years admittedly for the wrong reasons. It has meant that I've completely burnt out several times. I didn't really have the passion for it so it probably hasn't been my best work and I've lost myself in this world of science communication. Now I realise this sounds fairly extreme, so just a reminder that this is my experience but there may be something you can take away from it. Experiment with what you want to achieve in your science communication. If you are not indecisive like me, then you can hopefully get a clearer goal in your mind sooner. So, whenever you take on an opportunity, ask yourself this: will it help me take the next step towards my scicomm goal? And will this be a good learning experience for me? If the answer to either of those questions is no, then maybe you don't need to take on that offer. You can be selective with what works for you.

## 2. Make sure you have a personal website so you can develop a portfolio and watch it grow

The next thing I wish I had done before starting science communication was have a website. Now my first foray into science communication was blogging so technically I had a website, but I mean a personal website so you can develop a portfolio as you go through your career. You can watch it grow and reflect on how much you have achieved. But also so you don't forget anything.

I switched my blog into more of a website later on - which you can absolutely do - but it did come with its challenges. It only needs to be a single page if need be, but having that presence that you can manage and curate yourself is so valuable. We will dive into the whys and hows of websites for scientists and science communicators in future episodes. But having that portfolio also means that more opportunities and more relevant opportunities will come your way, and you can point people to all your experience and examples in one place.

It seems like such a simple thing, maybe even a trivial thing, to say under this episode title of 'what I wish I knew before starting', but if I had known about the importance of personal branding, having a niche, and basically having an online CV then I would have started building that from day dot.

## 3. What a career in science communication actually looked like

The next one is probably one that any budding science communicator would say. But I wish I had known what a career in science communication actually looked like before I took the leap.

Now there isn't a simple answer for this. There are so many different ways you can have a career in science communication, or even use science communication for a more impactful research career, but from my experience doing science communication within organisations is very different to how you do scicomm as a researcher, or even how I aspire to do scicomm as a freelancer.

The biggest challenge for me since leaving the lab bench and immersing myself in science communication completely is not having my own research to talk about any more, not having my own little area of expertise. I get a big kick out of supporting researchers to share their latest breakthroughs or helping them see why science communication is so great and how it can help them, but more recently I have actually missed talking about science.

Now you might be listening to this thinking that I sound a little bit mad saying that I don't talk about science when I'm a science communicator. But this kinda links back to this whole point and knowing what a career in science communication looks like and is why I want to continue to share my life and career as a science communicator for anyone also wanting to tread this path.

Scicomm jobs within science organisations vary wildly. You can have the same job title for different responsibilities or vice versa. But every organisation does things differently. There will be jobs where you do write about the latest science, but there will be other jobs where you have got to think more about the organisation, the brand and the strategy. So you might be using social media now to share the latest news about reproductive biology, but another science communicator may be using it to promote events and vacancies and news articles. Others may dive deeper into the stats and analytics of websites, videos and so on. What I am trying to say is that not all science communication jobs look the same. Another reason why I invite other science communicators and other communicators onto the podcast to share their experiences, and also why I want to dedicate a whole season of the toolkit podcast to careers in the future.

I absolutely don't regret moving into science communication. But with hindsight being a wonderful thing, I just wish I could have known more about what different careers in scicomm looked like.

#### 4. Consuming is just as important as creating

The penultimate thing to share with you today is that consuming is just as important as creating. Many science communicators, myself included, can get too bogged down with the fact I need to bring out however many blog posts, videos, or Instagram posts a week. How we will get judged almost on our outputs and that is a big part of how we grow and improve and become successful. But if you don't allow yourself to read, you don't know what kind of writer you could be. If you don't go to science festivals, you won't be inspired by others. If

you don't listen to someone's TED talk or someone's weekly departmental science seminar, you won't know what kind of presenter and public speaker you could be.

Of course, it is a fine balance. You don't want to spend all your time consuming because that doesn't give you any time to formulate your ideas, to exercise your creativity, to just give yourself some time to breathe and think and know what you want to stand for or be known for. But just churning out video after video or podcast after podcast, is not what is going to make you successful. Take the time to invest in yourself and your craft too. I've got stuck when I'm just creating and now I feel like I'm consuming so much that I can't create or don't know where to start. So, just be aware of that.

#### 5. Don't be afraid to ask - for questions, help, experience, feedback

And that kind of leads me on to my final point today and probably the biggest thing I wish I had known before starting science communication, and indeed it is so relevant to many aspects of my life, and that is don't be afraid to ask. Ask questions. Ask for help. Ask for opportunities and experiences. Ask for feedback. The worst that can happen is that the person you are asking says no.

When I started my first full time job in science communication, I thought I needed to know all the answers. That is not the case. People want to help you learn and want to see you grow and flourish. If they don't then they are not the manager or mentor for you. When I have been working within organisations as a science communicator, I was too afraid to ask people in similar roles to mine questions like 'what metrics do they track on social media', 'how do they manage their organisation's blog' and so on. I thought they wouldn't want to share because they are competitors, or because it was some kind of secret, or because I would get judged for not knowing. Stupid things like that. Since I have asked some wonderful colleagues recently, just these simple questions, I have learnt so much, and as usual, I now have even more questions to ask to learn more. You will never know if you don't ask so if there is one thing you take from this episode, please let it be this.

And just like that we are back at the DIY section of the pod. This is the section where I share an exercise or resource with you so you can go and take action on the episode's topic and build your skills right away. With today's episode being a little different, it's been more of a personal and reflective one, I was wondering if there was anything that I would be able to share in this part, but it turns out there are two things.

Firstly, ask yourself if you are consuming and creating in balance. If you are tipping too much in one direction than the other, start to make some little tweaks to level it up. Don't forget to just give yourself some time to think as well. Journaling is something I have found during the pandemic which has been so valuable for me. Also remember when you are creating, you don't always have to publish or show what it is. If you are trying a new style of writing out, or just want to practice editing video footage together, you don't have to show it to anyone. It is the act of creating that is what we are looking for here.

The final thing, and the thing I really really want you to do today whenever you have finished listening to this episode is to ask for something. If you have a scicomm question, ask someone you admire how they did it. Ask that person to be your scicomm mentor, or ask if they have a spare five minutes to give you some feedback on your latest article. Ask someone if you can volunteer with them to gain some radio production experience. Whatever it is that is relevant for you, send that email, that DM, whatever it is, and just ask.

And that is a wrap on this episode. I am so excited to be back and sharing more scicomm tips and advice in season 2. If you are new here, then please do head back and listen through season 1 where we talk through the scicomm foundations, we talk about making science filmmaking, free tools to help with your scicomm and more. And there is plenty more where that came from. I will be here sharing more with you every week for the next 10 episodes.

If you enjoyed today's episode then please let me know. As mentioned, feedback is super important, but of course let me know if you didn't like it either as I always want to improve and share useful things too. But if you did enjoy this episode, please share it with your friends, your family or your lab mates. It all helps me to get this podcast into the ears of more people and hopefully grow our community of science communicators even further. As always, I would be hugely grateful if you wanted to rate, review or subscribe to the podcast. You can get all the transcripts and shownotes on my website [sophtalksscience.com/scicommtoolkit](http://sophtalksscience.com/scicommtoolkit) and find me on socials too.

Until next time, have a fab time and I hope to see you back here on The SciComm Toolkit podcast very soon. Bye.