Online Communication and Social Networks

Animal research remains a vital part of medical and veterinary development. It is important that public support remains strong for this important work. To achieve this, effective and informative webpages must be combined with social media, to ensure the public can find clear and factual information about the role of animals in research.

The participants of this workshop at the 5th Basel Declaration Conference in San Francisco (February 14/15, 2018) concluded that greater transparency and outreach is a benefit to both individual institutions and the sector in general. It is important for institutions to be clear about the work they conduct. Furthermore, proactive communication can help mitigate future problems for the institution, as well as empowering their scientists by showing support for the work they do.

As such, we believe that there is a huge role for institutions and individuals to play in the digital sphere, explaining the important work they do involving animals.

The Vision

We believe that every institution should have a clear statement that explains how and why animals are used in research. This statement would embody the spirit in which animal research is conducted at that institution. This would both set the tone for members of the public looking for information, but also provide a powerful statement in support of all staff involved directly or indirectly in animal research and care at the institution. This statement should exist within a network of webpages that provide greater information and context about the use of animals at the institution. The information provided should allow members of the public and journalists to understand how and why animal research is conducted and answer the questions they may have about the institution's approach to such research.

Recommendations

Different institutions currently provide differing levels of information on their website. Openness is an ongoing process and every institution can find new ways to communicate their animal research online. We provide a list of building blocks that an institution's animal research pages should contain if it is to improve public understanding of the institution's work. This statement, and the associated webpages should be easily accessed by the public in both location and language. This means ensuring that the webpage can be found through by both Googling "<institution> animal research", and also by searching "animal research" through the institution's website search bar.

1. **A statement on animal research**

To support an institution in developing a statement, they should seek to answer the following questions. (a) Why animals are used in research at the institution; (b) How animals are cared for at the institution; (c) The conditions that must be met before any animal research can be approved. This could be provided using the following sentence starters:

   a. "<Institution> uses animals in research because…"
   b. "We ensure animals are well cared for by…"
   c. "Animal research will only be approved when…"

2. **Provide basic information about an institution's animal research**

There are many questions that the public and media may have about an institution's animal research. The following elements may help to answer many of the more common queries.

    a. Information about animal care – including the role played by veterinarians and animal technicians.

    b. Information about the ethical considerations that are made before any animal research is approved. This would include the role and makeup of any ethical review body within the institution (e.g. IACUC or AWERB).

    c. Examples of animal research conducted at the institution – these case studies can be both current and historical. For current research, it may be beneficial to include the grant numbers so that those interested can find more information.

    d. Statistics covering the species and number of animals used in research. Links to the original data can be beneficial.

    e. Information about the regulations that institutions must abide by in conducting their animal research.

There are many misconceptions that exist within animal research. You may wish to consider including, implicitly or explicitly, the answer to the following questions – though this list is not exhaustive. You should find the questions or misconceptions most relevant to your institution.

    a. What oversight exists in animal research?
    b. Under what circumstances are non-animal methods used?
    c. Who is responsible for animal care in an institution?
    d. How do animals benefit from such research?

3. **Provide greater information about an institution's animal research?**

In order to build trust between the public and an institution and their researchers, there is much additional information that can help them visualise and contextualise the science. Below we provide just a few ways in which this can be done.

    a. Including clear mention of the animal (and species) in your website's latest news stories and press releases. Link from these stories to your animal research pages (and vice versa).

    b. Actual images of animals from an institution's research labs.

    c. Mention animals in your social media (particularly Facebook and Twitter) – by ensuring animals are mentioned in relevant science stories from your institution. Social media is a great place to positively engage with your followers about the how and why you use animals.

    d. Videos explaining why animal research is conducted and the environment in which it is done.

    e. Writing blogs or articles, either on a personal website, on the websites of others, about how and why animals are used in research. These blogs could be posted on any number of websites, such as The Conversation, Huffington Post, Speaking of Research, and others.

    f. Unconventional methods of communication can sometimes be the most effective on social media. Marketing techniques can be applied to science communication and used to respond to the misinformation and misconceptions that exists on the internet.

Implementation

Before an institution begins to improve its website information, including the addition of a statement, certain stakeholders must be brought on board – particularly key members of the senior administration. In order to

make this possible, we recommend starting a working group to discuss and implement suggested improvements. The following stakeholders may be beneficial:

- Members of the senior administration
- Members of the communication/PR team
- Senior research and laboratory staff
- Senior members of security and legal departments

In order to best develop this information, you should consult heavily with researchers, veterinarians, animal care staff, laboratory administrators, members of other departments (e.g. ethics and law faculties) and even, if possible, members of the public.

Best Practice Examples
The following websites provide best practice in different aspects of animal research website communication:
- Explaining historical successes in research: https://animalresearch.wisc.edu/wisconsin-discoveries/
- Providing animal research statistics: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/animal-research/areas-we-study/
- Addressing common misconceptions: https://www.manchester.ac.uk/research/environment/governance/ethics/animals/what/
- Explaining animal welfare: https://www.ed.ac.uk/research/animal-research/animal-welfare-ethics
- Industry explaining animal research: https://www.animalstudies.bayer.com/

For many, many more examples of great practice, look down the Speaking of Research statement list for those institutions with full marks (four ticks): https://speakingofresearch.com/get-involved/statements-on-animal-research/

Background
A recent article in Science (Wadman, 2017) showed that there are some fantastic examples of providing greater openness about animal research online. These include the online "Lab Animal Tour" by Understanding Animal Research, that allows users to walk round the inside of four British animal labs from their home computers, and "Come See Our World", an initiative by Americans for Medical Progress to encourage US institutions to share images from inside their facilities. There is also an increasing number of institutions which are producing strong content about animal research for their own websites, however the article notes that many institutions fall short on the information they provide online.
Speaking of Research provides a list of 350 institutions from all over the world which provide information about their animal research programmes online. As noted in the Science article, there appear to be differences between countries, with the UK leading the way on website content. Of the 29 institutions rated as getting four out of four for this information: 4 are from Germany, 2 from the Netherlands, 15 from the UK, 6 from the US and 2 international organisations. The Science article noted differences in public support, with two points to note. Firstly, that US support had fallen steadily and further than that in the UK (which had risen since the Concordat on Openness), and secondly that support was lowest among the under 35s. Shareable video content has been used effectively by organisations trying to target younger audiences. Pro-Test Italia has produced YouTube videos which directly question some of the Italian critics of animal research, as well as tackling the difficult theme of primates in neuroscience.

- Wadman, Meredith. 2017. *"A trans-Atlantic transparency gap on animal experiments"*, *Science* 357 (6347), 119-120
- Americans for Medical Progress. 2017. Come see Our World. www.comeseeourworld.org
- Understanding Animal Research. 2017. Lab Animal Tour. www.labanimaltour.org
- Pro-test Italia. 2017. Videos. https://www.youtube.com/user/ProTestItalia1/

San Francisco, February 15, 2018