

Host: Robert Frederick

Hello and welcome to The Conjectural — an experiment to figure out a better way to decide what science news is and how we should talk about science. The data for this experiment? Your feedback to TheConjectural.com. I'm Robert Frederick. In this episode, an interview with David Grimm, the online news editor of *Science* magazine.



I have a confession to make: if a subject or topic is interesting to me, I will read the driest, most boring writing about it. I will listen to a monotone lecture that would send the rest of the audience to sleep. I will watch a documentary film that is really nothing more than just pictures — they don't even need to be moving pictures. In other words, I don't need a story, characters, a plot, or anything like that in order to derive real pleasure from reading, listening, or viewing things about subjects that interest me. And the subject of science, all of science, is of interest.

According to David Grimm...

Interviewee: David Grimm

I'm David Grimm, the online news editor of *Science* magazine

Host: Robert Frederick

...I'm not at all the audience that most science journalists are writing for.

Interviewee: David Grimm

If they're not invested, there's no way they're going to make it through thousands and thousands of words because they can't just be invested in the science, they have to be — just like a good movie — they have to be invested in the characters, in the plot, and wondering what's going to happen next.

Host: Robert Frederick

So I spoke with David about the audience that most science journalists are writing for. I asked him about what makes for a science story as opposed to a science report, about why science news is divided up into short reports and longer stories, about whether there's a role in science journalism for advocacy, and a bit about the business of science journalism, including some of the choices we science journalists face in deciding what to cover, especially what to cover online, where David does most of his work as online news editor for *Science* magazine. Here's the interview.

Host: Robert Frederick

So you've written everything from hundred-word captions to pictures to an entire book. I want to talk about that transition that you go from from a report to a story. Where would you say, at what level, how long is a report before it becomes a story?

Interviewee: David Grimm

Yeah, it's a good question. I mean I think when we usually think about stories we think about features, and our features, at least for *Science*, I think once you get above two-thousand words you're in feature territory because at that point you need to start doing things that are going to keep your readers' attention that you don't necessarily have to do in a shorter story. Most of our news stories are six-hundred to eight-hundred words. They have sources in them, but they don't necessarily have things like what we call "color," like painting scenes or talking about what people look like or sound like or act like. Once you start getting over that two-thousand-word threshold, you start having to incorporate things like that into your story — things like a narrative, things like

maybe even an arc for a character, and certainly things like maybe what someone looks like and how they're acting because usually with a story that's over two-thousand words — not always but often — you are doing site visits, which we don't usually do for shorter news stories, or "reports" as you call them, where you're are visiting a scientist while he or she is doing their work in a lab or going on a field expedition with them or visiting the site of a space telescope being built in the Atacama Desert in Chile. These are all types of things you would not necessarily do for a report.



Host: Robert Frederick

Okay, so what makes it a piece of news that you want to tell as a story as opposed to just reporting it?

Interviewee: David Grimm

Yeah, that's a good question. I think there's no hard-and-fast rules, but reports or, you know, just sort of daily news stories tend to focus on a particular finding — this was just announced, this just happened today — whereas features typically address a larger question, a larger issue — this is where a field is going or this is a big mystery that scientists are trying to solve but they haven't solved it yet, but here are all the things they're trying. So something, when things start to get more diffuse beyond a single finding — when you start to ask, you know, a good way to think about it is if there is sort of a big, central question that you can ask that is sort of going to take a lot of different kinds of reporting to answer — that's usually often what helps make a feature story, when you know that you are going to really need to get into a lot more level of detail. Some other things are you need to know you're going to be talking to a lot of sources. For a report, you know, maybe you're talking to two, three sources at most. But when you start thinking like, "You know, I'm going to have to interview five, ten people for this story," and again, "I really have to do a site visit for this story." "I really have to visit this researcher." "I've got to visit this installation." When you start thinking about things like that, that's when you know that you're in feature territory. And sometimes you want to force yourself into feature territory. You might say like, "Look, this is kind of, you know, maybe a report level, but there's something extra that I can add by being there on the scene," or "there's a really interesting personality at the center of this scientific finding and I really want to get into the details of who this person is and maybe why he or she got into this problem, and what's driving this person." These are things that are hard to get into in a report, but you do have the breathing room to get into something like that in a feature.

Host: Robert Frederick

So if the overall goal of a feature is to answer one of these big questions that you can't really get at with a sentence-long reply, why do you need to go into scene-setting or character-sketches or information about the person's family, or how the person looks in order to answer those bigger questions?

Interviewee: David Grimm

Well I think the job of the science journalist is two-fold. The first job of the science journalist is to inform. But the second job is to entertain. And what I mean by entertain is not necessarily that the science journalist has to put exclamation points in every sentence and you know, throw a lot of crazy art into their story. I think what I mean by "entertain" is really provide a compelling, satisfying reading experience. And you don't have to worry about that as much with the daily news story. I mean you do have to worry about keeping things conversational and obviously compelling and ideally fun to read, but the challenges get a lot more exponential when you're dealing with a feature because with a report you've got to hold the reader's attention for six-hundred to eight-

hundred words — you know, two to three minutes — it's not easy, but it's not difficult. But when you're talking about keeping the reader's attention for thousands of words, the information is not enough. You have to find new ways to convey that information throughout the story. And so sometimes that's going to be about talking about somebody's personal life that's maybe relevant to the science because people like reading about things like that. Sometimes it will be about setting a scene, you know — you're in the Arabian desert and what does it look like and smell like and feel like, and what's the temperature like. These types of things that really sort of draw a reader into a story and just like with a great novel, I mean, I think your reader really needs to be invested not just intellectually but sort of emotionally with the story. If they're not invested, there's no way they're going to make it through thousands and thousands of words because they can't just be invested in the science. They have to be — just like a good movie — they have to be invested in the characters and the plot and wondering what's going to happen next. And these are all things that you need to throw in not just because they're fun and challenging to throw in, but because you want your reader to stick around, you want your reader to finish that story and feel a sense of satisfaction that not only did they learn something but they just had a compelling, good time sitting down with you and your words. And that's hard to achieve but that's really the goal of great feature writing.



Host: Robert Frederick

Now it's interesting to me you have used two words that Cicero used — the great Roman orator — regarding speeches: “inform,” “entertain.” The third part of his triad for making a good speech was also *movere*, which we don't really have a word for. It's “to move,” but you used the word “compelling,” which is in a sense the same thing. So compelling the reader to do what? To finish the story? Or to act on the story in some way? Or something else?

Interviewee: David Grimm

I think it's really compelling the reader to finish the story, but also, you know in our Internet age, compelling the reader to share the story. I mean they'll share the story if they think it's got some cool information, you know, they might post on Facebook or Twitter, “Hey, check out this cool fact or couple of facts that I learned,” which you could probably get from a report. But people also share because a story moved them, you know, “This was an amazing read.” You know, “I cried while I was reading this.” “I, you know, I shared this with my parents even though they're not scientists — I was just so emotionally invested in this story that I had to share it with others.” And that's really the ultimate compliment as a journalist, not just to hear that people liked your story, but that they liked your story so much that they shared it with their friends and their families. So I think it really does get to that third part of the triad that Cicero was talking about, that just sort of moving people — not just moving them emotionally but actually moving them to share those feelings with others in the form of your story.

Host: Robert Frederick

So sharing the story with others, interesting facts, things like that — but what about political movement or making an influential story — I don't know what Cicero intended exactly by *movere* but one gets the sense that as a political orator he was trying to get people up to stand up and go do something. So is there a similar type of thing in science journalism?

Interviewee: David Grimm

Yeah, I think it's a good question. I mean, I think as journalists we need to be careful about being advocates because we should really be objective bystanders who are reporting on the facts and letting the readers come to their own conclusions about you know, what they should think or even



what action they should take. That being said, I think it is always gratifying for a journalist, especially if they're writing about a hot-button issue, to write about something that actually makes an impact beyond that one reader. That it maybe somehow enacts some change, I mean just sort of speaking personally for myself, one of my favorite stories that I wrote for *Science* was a story I wrote in 2009 called "A cure for euthanasia." And this was a story a lot about science, it was really talking about "Can we develop a sort of one-shot birth control for cats and dogs?" And the reason being that so many cats and dogs, first of all, are euthanized in the U.S., but especially in a lot of developing countries, you know, cats and dogs are essentially massacred on the streets because of these countries don't have the infrastructure to spay and neuter. And when you think about animal welfare, this is sort of a horrific global problem. And so the goal of the scientists were to see if "Can we come up with a very easy way, like a pill or a shot, that we could give these animals that maybe people could even dart, you know, feral cats and dogs in the streets so that they wouldn't have to kill them, they could just control their population that way, and also alleviate a lot of the suffering of homeless animals, sort of preventing a lot of unwanted animals from being born on the street?" Well, this is a story that I wrote — very happy with it because I'm an animal lover, so this was a story that was sort of near and dear to my heart. And really the icing on the cake was that I ended up winning a National Press Club award for it for animal reporting. And the other really nice thing was that, you know, sort of speaking of stories that make an impact, one of the people that I interviewed for the story was this man who lived in rural Alabama who was dealing with a really, sort of, uncontrollable feral cat problem where he had feral cats come into his house but he also saw them sort of dying all over town because they were being born and born and born, and nobody was taking care of them. And in response to my story he actually had a few local humane organizations reach out to him and offer to help. And so that was really gratifying even though I didn't write the story necessarily to enact that type of change. Just the fact that, you know, some people felt the story was so powerful they actually wanted to get in touch with this individual and help him out was really gratifying for me as a journalist.

Host: Robert Frederick

So you had both an award-winning and an influential story, it sounds like. How did it fare on the Internet? How popular was it as well?

Interviewee: David Grimm

That's a great question. This was in 2009, so we weren't tracking our stories to quite the extent that we do now. I do know that, you know, based on the emails I got that it had sort of, I don't know if "widely read" would be accurate. You know, I don't really have numbers, but it certainly had reached a decent audience. And I think today we would really have some hard figures on how far and wide this story had traveled.

Host: Robert Frederick

How about other stories that you do have more recent numbers on? Are the award-winning ones also the popular ones or the influential ones, or not?

Interviewee: David Grimm

That's a good question. I don't know if there's a super strong correlation. I mean in some ways there is a bit because the award-winning stories tend to be the stories that really connect with a very broad group of people. And you're going to see that, you know, on Facebook or Twitter, if you have a lot of people sharing a particular story, even people that are not maybe the intended audience. Maybe they're not people with a background in science or an interest in science. You

know, once you sort of reach beyond — it's sort of like a movie, you know, a lot of the movies that win Academy Awards aren't necessarily the movies that just sort of connect with the small segment of the population, they raise issues or they contain performances or, you know, even cinematography that really sort of captures the imagination of a large group of people — those are the type of movies and I think also the type of stories that people tend to rally around.



Host: Robert Frederick

Okay. Now you are in charge of, as I understand it, news.sciencemag.org, the online news site for *Science* magazine, is that right?

Interviewee: David Grimm

That's correct.

Host: Robert Frederick

And I am looking at a listing from *The Washington Post's* The Most of the top-three news stories on *Science* magazine right now, and story number three is from the 3rd of March, 2015, so this is the third most popular story on *Science* magazine's website right now: "How big is the average penis?"

Interviewee: David Grimm

Yes. So the average penis story, which, for good or for bad, has been one of our most popular stories not just of the week but of the year, you know, it's, what can I say — it's a sexy topic, no pun intended. I mean, you know, it's something at least half the population is interested in.

Host: Robert Frederick

Right.

Interviewee: David Grimm

It's a question a lot of people ask. And you know, a story like that is going to do very well for us on a Google search because that, you know, is a search that a lot of people are going to ask and lo-and-behold when they ask that question, our story is going to come up at the top of the rankings. So, you know, we tried to treat that story more seriously, we tried to give it a very science take, but at the end of the day, you know, it is a, you know, it is one of those topics that you can't do a bad story on. Well, you can do a bad story on, but it's hard not to get traffic on a story like that just because it's one of those perennial questions.

Host: Robert Frederick

Yeah, it's got nearly five-hundred comments at this point.

Interviewee: David Grimm

I'm not surprised.

Host: Robert Frederick

So to what extent then is there a broad discussion about whether a story is newsworthy — is it really worth informing the public about?

Interviewee: David Grimm

Yeah, I mean that's a question we deal with every day for the news site. You know, we have a meeting every morning and I go through dozens of press releases every day and countless pitches

from freelancers and even staff members every day and every week. And we only have a limited amount of resources. There's only so much editing power we have, and only so much money we have to pay freelancers. And our staff writers are working on a number of other stories and they don't have the time to throw themselves at every story that comes along. So we're always struggling with this issue of what are the, you know, three, five, maybe even ten stories we're going to run today out of the hundreds or maybe even thousands of potential stories that are out there. You know, and for us it really comes down to a question I think we can answer very well at *Science*, which is "What's really the biggest science advance?" That's probably the first question and the second question is "Are our readers going to care about it?" You know, something can be a huge advance, but if we really don't think there's going to be interest in that advance — you know, if it's something that's very esoteric maybe in the field of quantum physics or earth science or even, you know, biology, you know we're less likely to cover it. But it's always really sort of a trade off between what's important, what our readers are going to be interested in, and then finally, and ideally a very distant third is "Do we have the resources to cover it?" Yes, it's important. Yes our readers will care. But can we devote the time to sort of writing this up in a way that we're going to feel, you know, proud of and satisfied with on our website. And sometimes, you know, stories slip through the cracks just because we're dealing with so many things that we just can't focus on a particular story.



Host: Robert Frederick

So that would include maybe stories that are too difficult or too involved or would take too much time to figure out how to describe to an audience?

Interviewee: David Grimm

Well, I mean I would say that we don't really shy away from a challenge. We've got staffers who have been here for decades and they're often up to a challenge. But the question is "Is that challenge something that they can tackle at that particular time or are they dealing with a bunch of other challenges and solving this challenge may result in a story but it's not going to be a story that would have as high an impact or readership as one of the other stories?" So, you know, it's not so much about whether it's hard but whether that difficulty justifies the cost.

Host: Robert Frederick

David Grimm, thank you very much.

Interviewee: David Grimm

Thank you.

Host: Robert Frederick

David Grimm is the online news editor of *Science* magazine. Thanks also to Sarah Crespi of *Science* magazine for her recording support. You've been listening to The Conjectural. Find us online at TheConjectural.com where you can give feedback and support, download a transcript, and subscribe to the show. Follow me on Twitter [@TheConjectural](https://twitter.com/TheConjectural). I'm Robert Frederick. Thanks for joining us!