

OC5 3-

5 communication with media and general public

[00:00:00.00] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:16.86] And of course myself use Nextstrain. So, in our work to communicate with colleagues in the government and other teams in the regions. And as an active member of the Nextstrain team, what's your thought on bioinformatics and how we should communicate with the media, how we can share the information?

[00:00:40.20] Yeah, so it was a really interesting time for Nextstrain. We were somewhat known in the scientific community. We actually have been around since 2015. But it was still fairly niche. You really had to be into phylogenetics and a couple of the viruses that we worked on. Or the flu world, we were known quite well. But for SARS-COV-2, obviously, things changed really quickly. And we're really grateful that we were able to adapt to that change. But we're also pretty lucky because it wasn't necessarily a given that our workflow would have been flexible enough.

[00:01:11.22] We were really lucky that we were set up well for that. But it also was a new challenge because we had more people looking at Nextstrain trees, for example, and especially nonscientists looking at Nextstrain trees. And the smallest mistakes were sometimes used to create misinformation and to miscommunicate. So we very quickly learned that we were really operating in a different world and that having this kind of accurate communication was actually vital because one bad sequence getting through with the wrong date, the next thing we'd know there'd be a Facebook post circulating with people saying, oh, this shows whatever conspiracy theory of the day.

[00:01:47.14] And so that's not standard scientific operating procedure. But it highlighted that you can help to play a good role in communication. But it is. It's something you have to do actively. It's not something that necessarily will just happen in the background. And everything will be OK. You have to really put some effort in.

[00:02:04.65] Well, I work in Thailand. So how we can improve our communication with the policy makers, with the public, then?

[00:02:15.75] That's a tough one.

[00:02:17.04] [LAUGHTER]

[00:02:17.37] Because you try so hard to be accurate and precise. And you choose your words very carefully. And especially my experience dealing with the press, you go to great lengths to say very carefully, this is probable. We assume. It is likely. It is not likely. And then it gets converted into something totally different. So your quoters are saying something that was never said.

[00:02:50.88] And it's quite frustrating. And I don't know. I think we need training. But I also think that-- so I think more training for scientists with communicating. But I think-- I don't know about in your context-- but our journalism, I think, needs to step up. What I heard is

that some of the media houses, they don't have lots of people to have someone on a science editor and a business editor, with these specialist jobs.

[00:03:22.53] And so these young journalists just take up a story. One minute they're talking about crime. And the next minute they're reporting on SARS-COV-2. And I don't think they have the time and the background to really appreciate what you're saying. And it was very difficult. I think more training. I don't know. Very hard.

[00:03:45.95] I would certainly agree with that. And I think that this, certainly the pandemic in a very stark way, but it has highlighted how important having some scientists that can communicate is.

[00:03:54.74] Yes.

[00:03:55.16] I would emphasise that I don't think everyone--

[00:03:57.04] Everyone needs to do it.

[00:03:57.44] Everyone does not have to be a science communicator. It's not for everyone. But we also need to make sure that, I think, everyone has the chance to get that training because you never know when your field might be the one in the spotlight. And you're the one who is going to be the person who can give the insight to this or give the interview. I don't think many people who got involved in science communication in this pandemic would have seen that coming. But being prepared makes that a lot easier.

[00:04:22.59] But I'd also second that I think we have to also think about a lot of journalism and news agencies are suffering right now, the loss of print media. And how do you make money on the internet? Big question. But that has led to a lot of this loss of specialist journalism. And, certainly, I very much could tell the difference between when I was being interviewed by people that did do science journalism and when I was being interviewed by someone who, their paper, for example, didn't have those resources.

[00:04:50.96] And it makes a huge difference to the kind of information that the reader then gets and what they can take away from that story. And it's critical in a time like a pandemic. But it's not a given unfortunately.