

How is climate change affecting
the force and frequency of hurricanes?
Are robots going to steal our jobs?

Can plants help fight depression?



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These are just three questions of the many thousands that are being debated by ordinary citizens and also being studied by academic researchers. And yet, how often does the public hear about the findings of these researchers? The answer is, not nearly often enough.



As the editor of an online publication committed to bridging the gap between academia and the general public, I know what a wealth of knowledge and ideas is being developed at universities. I also know, having seen the size of our audience grow and grow, that there is a hunger for this kind of information. One of the key challenges, however, is to motivate academics to engage with the public in this way.

Academics Apart?

The term ‘ivory tower’ is often used as shorthand for the university being a place apart, a world that does not interact with the practical concerns of the everyday even if the “everyday” is the subject of an academic’s research. Career incentives at universities focus on publication in peer reviewed journals not on the dissemination of that knowledge to wider audiences.

Indeed, according to professors Asit K. Biswas and Julian Kirchherr,¹ the average article in a peer reviewed journal is read only ten times. And this limited exposure is not only because of expensive journal subscriptions and digital paywalls. It is also because the language used to communicate research is often intelligible only to other specialists. The result, as the Harvard historian—and regular *New Yorker* magazine contributor—Jill Lepore puts it, is “a great, heaping mountain of exquisite knowledge surrounded by a vast moat of dreadful prose”.²

But bridges are now being built to cross that moat. And, encouragingly, many are being built by academics.

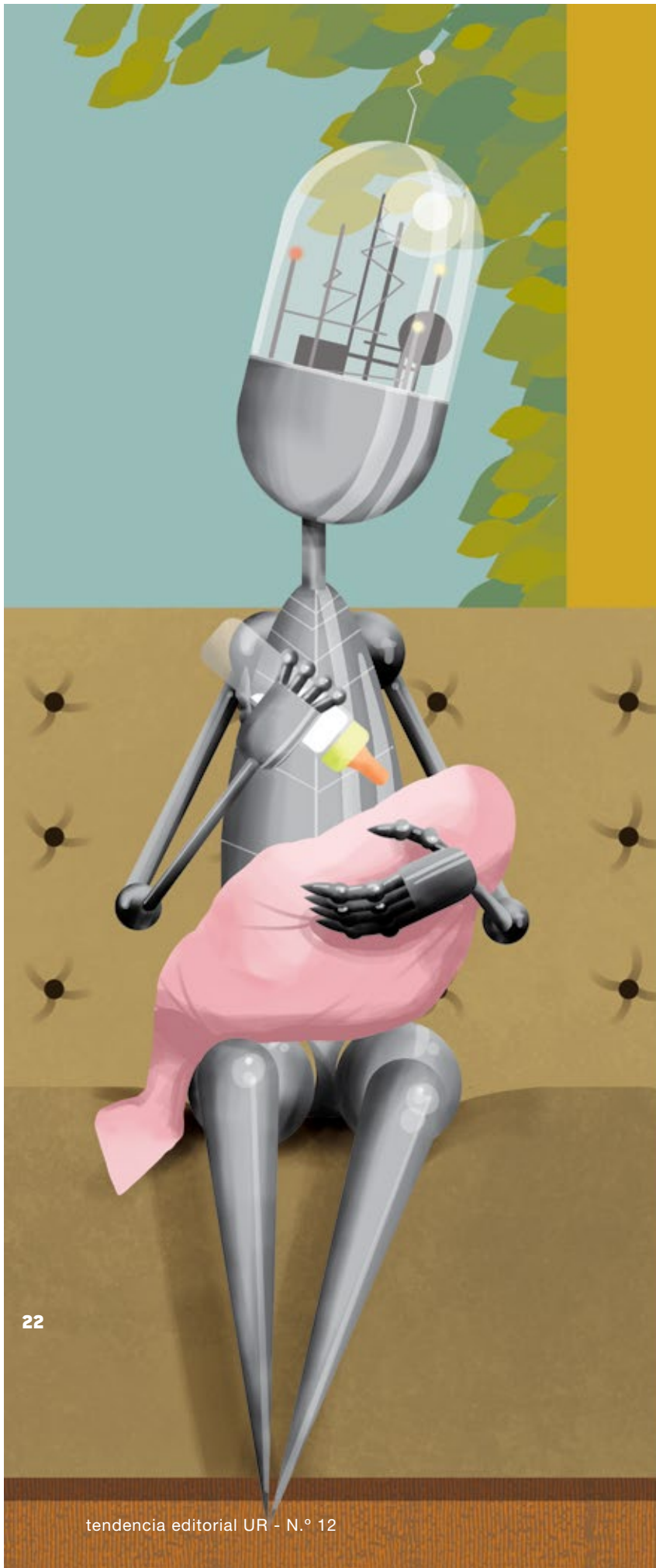
An Obligation

In the United States, as the role of the informed expert is being questioned at the highest levels of government and misinformation is being circulated with ever greater ease, a number of university presidents are championing and promoting the role of the scientist in the public square.

“As the president of one of our country’s leading research university systems”, writes Janet Napolitano of the University of California, “I believe it is now incumbent on the academic community to ensure that the

1 <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/prof-no-one-is-reading-you>

2 <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/opinion/sunday/kristof-professors-we-need-you.html>



work and voices of researchers are front and center in the public square”.³

Mark Schlissel, the president of the University of Michigan, speaks in similarly quasi moral terms: “I share with my fellow presidents the notion that it’s actually a responsibility, or even an obligation, of universities to engage in public discourse and to share the expertise that we accumulate, the knowledge we discover, and the understanding we achieve with the public at large”.⁴

Academic associations, too, are deliberating whether engaging with the public should count in an academic’s career —and, in particular, in their getting tenure. Just last year, for example, the American Sociological Association addressed this issue head on in a report released at their annual meeting.⁵

As one of the authors of the report, University of Massachusetts professor Amy Schalet, wrote, the report does not say that all sociologist should engage in public communication. “What it does is recognize that many faculty do already engage in public communications, and that such work has much to contribute to the world”. It also suggests that it is time to discuss how this work could count in a scholar’s career and proposes three concrete criteria for evaluating public engagement: the content of the writing; quality and rigor; and public impact.⁶

So, what can university presses do?

3 <https://theconversation.com/why-more-scientists-are-needed-in-the-public-square-46451>

4 <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mm/13950883.0001.001/1:3/--academic-engagement-in-public-and-political-discourse?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

5 file:///C:/Users/Maria/AppData/Local/Packages/Microsoft.MicrosoftEdge_8wekyb3d8bbwe/TempState/Downloads/tf_report_what_counts_evaluating_public_communication_in_tenure_and_promotion_final_august_2016.pdf

6 <https://theconversation.com/should-writing-for-the-public-count-toward-tenure-63983>

The Way Ahead

As someone who has worked with university presses albeit from the outside, I have a number of suggestions for your consideration.⁷

First, given university presses have a ringside seat at the unveiling of research the academic community deems valuable, I would argue that the obligation to share expertise that presidents Napolitano and Schlissel talk about also applies to you.

Two, as mediators between a given scholar's ideas and the wider public you can make your authors aware of the international debate currently taking place around public engagement and introduce them to publications – such as *The Conversation*⁸ —where they can begin to think about how to frame their ideas for a lay audience.

Three, as editors you can help them learn the skill of writing in plain, jargon free language and using story and idiom. As Amy Schalet says, “Such creative tools need not diminish heft, as professors often fear. Instead, they can help communicate complexity”.

And finally, you can persuade them of the benefits of communicating their research to the greater public. As we know from the experience of our authors at *The Conversation*, public engagement can help increase traffic to their scholarly articles and can result in valuable feedback to their work. Most importantly of all, however, at a time when facts and science are under attack, making sure people have access to evidence-based knowledge and ideas is nothing less, in the words of Boston University professor Adil Najam, than “about the future of truth.”

⁷ <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300158205/bagel>

⁸ www.theconversation.com

