The Conversation receives a lot of comments each day and you can't read everything. That's why we occasionally end the week with a selection of community highlights: comments we enjoyed or thought discussing.

If you’re going to ridicule research, do your homework

In one of our most-read stories this week, Rob Brooks responded to The Daily Telegraph ridiculing his research and that of others:

Sydney's Daily Telegraph is suffering one of their frequent relapses into frothy-mouthed panic about government wastage on research grants. Poking at layabout academics for 'wasting' tax dollars on seemingly frivolous projects reminds me of nothing more than the schoolyard bully who secretly knows he peaked in year 9. Today, the Tele flattered me by holding up one of my own projects for ridicule, ironically illustrating their point that rusted-on ideology, and patronage provide the most direct route possible to mediocrity.

In the comments, Jules O'Donnell argued that academics could do more to argue the case for some areas of research:

This article completely misses the opportunity presented by these shonky headlines to mount the important argument as to why research on certain areas is worth funding with public money.

We know the Tele, Andrew Bolt and Ray Hadley love going on anti-academic rampages. Of course it's fun to laugh at their hysteria.

But the article just points out that the funding grants are rigorously peer reviewed and difficult to get. That's an argument about their intellectual merit and has nothing to do with whether research should get public money.

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Patrick Stokes responded , offering further insight into the problem from an academic perspective:

If we want to defend the public funding of intellectual endeavours that aren't directly related to public policy problems like cancer and the economy, the obligation to do some 'homework' is on us.

That's no doubt true to a certain extent Jules, but it's not clear we should be putting the full onus back on researchers themselves. Personally, I do try to justify what I do with the public's money to the public, and I've argued here before that researchers need to get better at doing this.

But at the same time, researchers shouldn't have to spend huge chunks of their time perpetually defending their very existence instead of doing their jobs, nor should they have to justify the funding of their own domains rather than the funding of research in general. To use an admittedly limited analogy, nobody expects Olympic athletes to front the media every five minutes to explain why they and their particular sport are a good use of public funds. We certainly do ask that question, but we expect sports administrators, coaches etc. to make that case.

Now to their credit, universities and various peak bodies do speak out on this stuff. Even the ARC has issued a statement in response to the Tele's articles containing the wonderfully clear statement that "Research in the humanities and social sciences is just as important as science and technology." (Try getting a politician to say that!) But they link to the Australian Academy of the Humanities' "Power of the Humanites" report which is a useful document in many ways but makes the case for humanities research in largely instrumental terms.

And I get why they feel the need to do that. I get why it's easier to go to the public and say "Australian research led to WiFi and polymer banknotes and bionic ears!" rather than saying

“deepening human knowledge is an intrinsic good whether you personally happen to care about a particular segment of it or not.” But if we keep arguing this case on purely instrumental grounds we’re fighting on the chosen turf of people who want to tie all research funding to narrow economic or health goals.

For more on this subject, read A pub brawl over research funding doesn’t benefit any of us by Rod Lamberts and Will J Grant.

How to manage weight issues with your teenager when you’re not meant to talk about weight

Joann Lukin’s article explored the often difficult area of talking to teenagers about their weight and health. She offered a lot of advice, including, for example, how to be a good role model:

It’s important to think about how you stack up as a role model for healthy behaviours. Do you participate in physical activity? What are your food choices like? How do you describe your body? If you’re the one putting food in the household, what are you buying?

Your credibility in the conversations with your teen depends upon whether you walk the walk (literally). This may be an opportunity to improve some of your health-related behaviours.

Rosemary Stanton offered some advice in the comments:

This is indeed a difficult subject. For younger teenagers and children, when I ran a private practice, I always asked parents to come and see me without the child. Excess weight in children and younger teenagers is always a family matter. I only had an individual consultation with teenagers who expressed a desire to come and talk to me and then I preferred them to come on their own. Seeing parent and child together almost inevitably attributed blame - ‘he always eats the wrong thing’ (even though the parent bought the food). With teenagers, there were often underlying family problems which led to the teenager taking refuge in food. This only

came out when I talked to the teenager on his or her own.

Could I make a suggestion. It's in relation to the sentence that includes ".. fruits, vegetables, proteins, carbohydrates, fats and oils." This mix-up of foods and nutrients is confusing. We don't go shopping and ask for 'proteins' or for 'carbohydrates' or for 'fats' . These are macronutrients and are widely distributed in foods. For example, fruits contain almost no protein or fat - so they could be termed 'carbohydrates', but we wisely use the term 'fruit'. Same with vegetables. It would also be useful to talk about wholegrains (giving examples such as oats, brown rice, wholegrain bread, breakfast cereals made from wholewheat). All these foods, incidentally, also contribute protein, although I suspect when most people use the term 'protein' they are referring to meat, poultry, seafoods, eggs, legumes, tofu, nuts and seeds (most of which also contain fats). By including a range of foods, you open up the conversation about likes and dislikes, cooking methods etc.

By talking about foods rather than nutrients, it's also easier to have a conversation about what the family might eat for breakfast, lunch or dinner. As soon as people start talking about protein or fat or carbs, many people not only pick up the wrong message but the conversation becomes more clinical.

Dietary guidelines have changed from a nutrient-centred approach to talking about foods. This change was made deliberately and it helps to follow suit in all aspects related to what we eat and drink.

Viewpoints: is addiction a disease?

In this Viewpoints article, Femke Buisman-Pijlman and Nicole Lee argued the for and against on this question respectively.

Here's a sample of Nicole's argument:

In the mid-20th century, a new movement started: the recovery movement, led by peer

organisations such as Alcoholics Anonymous. This signalled a shift towards a focus on disease. This shift was important in understanding drug use as a health issue and focusing responses towards support rather than blaming.

The downside to this way of thinking is that it conceptualises drug use and dependence as a problem you have no control over – it needs someone or something to “fix” it (typically a medicine). The first step in the 12-step movement demonstrates this well: “I admit that I am powerless over alcohol/drugs.” The pendulum had swung in the opposite direction.

And that from Femke:

A disease can be defined as a set of symptoms caused by external or internal factors. Dependence is not like a virus or infection, but more like a chronic disease. You may have a predisposition to it, but it will not manifest itself until it is triggered.

Our behaviour, whether it is drug-taking, over-eating or lack of exercise, may increase the chance of developing a disease. As with a chronic disease, long-term management may be necessary to get the best outcome, but relapses may still occur. I find this model helps people understand the long-term perspective of a person who is struggling to manage dependence.

Max King posted a comment about his experience with alcoholism:

40 years ago I presented a series of lectures on “The Biochemistry of Psychiatric Disorders” to post-grad. med. students. As an example of chemically induced psychoses I chose alcoholism. I indicated that a significant factor in this disorder was a dysfunctional alcohol dehydrogenase enzyme in the liver - hence alcoholism had a disease status. Thus these people had a low tolerance to alcohol, and excessive, prolonged alcohol usage would be a risk to mental and physical health. I do, however, remember saying that environmental, social and whatever else factors played a very important role in the establishment and maintenance of alcoholism.

The irony: 36 years ago, in front of a room full of strangers, I admitted to myself that I was powerless over alcohol and that my life had become unmanageable. Previously, on my descent into the gutter, I has tried to excuse my anti-social behaviour by crying “disease, not my fault” - this was my stick to beat those cruel souls who rejected my behaviour. But, having now admitted my problem, and desperate to be “well” (I was sick of being sick), I found, from the stories of other alkies, that thinking of alcoholism as a disease enabled me to have hope that it could be overcome. I was not to blame, but I was responsible - don’t pick up the first drink. A day at a time, since November 4, 1980, I have not picked up that alcoholic drink. I live, I have self-respect, I care. Guilt and shame are my enemies, so I no longer seek to accumulate them.

Intellectualising the “disease”, finding excuses, being dishonest with myself , thriving on guilt, shame and self-hatred did me no good.

Having said all that, I can empathise with both authors., at least in terms of alcohol addiction.

The Industrial Revolution kick-started global warming much earlier than we realised

The article explained new research that found that global warming started as early as the 1930s in some regions:

That is much earlier than previously thought, so our discovery redefines our understanding of when human activity began to influence our climate.

Determining when global warming began, and how quickly the planet has warmed since then, is essential for understanding how much we have altered the climate in different parts of the world. Our study helps to answer the question of whether our climate is already operating outside thresholds that are considered safe for human society and functional ecosystems.

Our findings show that warming did not develop at the same time across the planet. The tropical oceans and the Arctic were the first regions to begin warming, in the 1830s. Europe, North

America and Asia followed roughly two decades later.

Helen McGregor, one of the article's authors, posted the following question for her readers:

Hi Everyone, happy to answer any questions you may have on the article. One thought, we discuss why we don't see continental-scale warming in Antarctica but on the flip side why do we see early warming in the Arctic?

To which Ben Marshall responded :

Hi Helen,

Is there a prize for getting the answer right?

Um, is it because the Arctic is a more dynamic confluence of systems, what with it being made of, um, water, which moves about more, compared to the Antarctic which is rock. And bigger chunks of ice. Which just kind of sit there.

An ice cube melts quicker than an iceberg?

I give in.

What's the answer?

At the same time Helen was posting her answer:

The bright white ice in the Arctic region reflects heat and light back out into space. But with a little bit of extra heat trapped in the atmosphere by additional carbon dioxide the ice can begin to melt. Melting sea ice in particular exposes the surface ocean, which absorbs some of the heat. If the ocean surrounding the sea ice is a little warmer then it can further melt the ice, further exposing surface ocean, leading to more melting, and so on it goes 'amplifying' the initial warming.

She then replied to Ben:

Hi Ben - I think we posted at the same time. You were on the money with the ocean being involved.

Ben Marshall :

I win!

Helen answered quite a few other questions on her article. Have a read of the discussion here .

Authors: Cory Zanoni, Community Manager, The Conversation

Read more http://theconversation.com/community-highlights-64490