Today’s speakers

Dr. Sharon Manson Singer
Co-founder, EvidenceNetwork.ca

Mr. Steve Buist
Reporter, Hamilton Spectator

Dr. Michael Wolfson
Canada Research Chair, University of Ottawa
Evidence Network Works!

Sharon Manson Singer
Co-Founder Evidence Network
Professor of Public Policy
Simon Fraser University
What is EvidenceNetwork.ca?

EvidenceNetwork.ca is a non-partisan, web-based project funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the Manitoba Health Research Council to make the latest evidence on controversial health policy issues available to the media.
What do we do?

EvidenceNetwork.ca links journalists with health policy experts to provide access to credible, evidence-based information.
Why do we do it?

The Canadian Health Accord is scheduled for renegotiation in 2014. Canadians will have to make decisions about many complex health policy issues, including:

- Aging population impact
- Rising drug costs
- Health care accessibility
- Private sector financing/delivery
- User fees
- Sustainability of the healthcare system
- Mental health
- Diabetes
- Pharmaceutical issues

EvidenceNetwork.ca is committed to working with the media to build a healthy dialogue around Canadian healthcare.
How do we do it?

- Recruit experts in health policy focusing on the nine topics
- Currently setting up an International Panel to provide comparative analyses
- Get excellent advice from Independent Media Advisory Board
- Participate in Conferences, Webinars, Broadcast News to promote and discuss EN.ca
How do we do it?

- Work directly with Journalists to talk about Evidence and how to be more discerning of what is being claimed
- Work directly and individually with Health Experts to help them write 750 word op-eds
- Use a communication professional to liaise with Press and review op-eds for readability
Success to Date

- Over 80 op-eds published in 300 major dailies since April 2011
- Over 1000 reprints in smaller community dailies
- Built a Twitter following – most important venue of communication with over 2300 followers, mostly journalists and health policy experts
- Facebook - <500 followers mostly health care professionals
- Linked In which we use to promote our op-eds and start discussions
- Built partnerships with a variety of news media outlets and like-minded organizations
- Built a reputation for non-partisan, expert advice that is credible and evidence-based and peer reviewed
Canadian Health Policy in the News
Why Evidence Matters

NORALOU ROOS | SHARON MANSON SINGER | KATHLEEN O'GRADY
CAMILLA TAPP | SHANNON TURCZAK
Write a Snappy OpEd
To Change Minds, and Maybe Even Behaviours

Here’s how:
OpEds offer an important means to share your message – be it new research, a viewpoint or an idea on a topic that’s recently been in the news – with a wide, general readership. OpEds (which stands for ‘opposite the editorial pages’) are often one of the most widely read and redistributed sections of any respected broadsheet, and routinely influence key decision makers, affect policy and shape public perceptions.

OpEds, sometimes also called ‘commentaries,’ are generally provocative, sharp and precise. Following the basic rules of commentary writing is paramount for getting your submission published in the leading media outlets. It will also help sharpen your argument and develop the narrative that will leave a lasting impression with readers.

The following key perimeters will help keep your submission stylistically within the requirements of most major Canadian papers:
The commentary must be no more than 650-750 words, and must be timely (on something that’s recently been in the news, or should be);
It must focus on only a single or a few major points or arguments – keep it simple and compelling;
It must express a point-of-view or opinion on a specific topic on which you have expertise. This viewpoint should be expressed in the first couple of paragraphs up front (proofs for this opinion can follow);
Ideally, it will draw on more than just evidence, but use personal experience or a personal story as an example, or use a helpful metaphor to make your argument compelling as well as convincing (we want the readership to connect with the article). Research on its own rarely changes minds;
Stay away from jargon and too many statistical numbers – particularly up-front; it should read like a well-spoken, compelling speech with an informed conversational tone;
Citations are absolutely prohibited – both in the body of the text or afterward. If you have to credit someone with an idea, it has to be written within the sentence itself and be part of the story you are telling;
Leave the reader at the end with a solution, or steps toward a solution or next steps (other than ‘more research’), highlight who the players are (individuals? levels of government?) and what specifically needs to be done next.

Keep in mind that editors give preference to commentaries that follow these rules precisely, and that provide their readers with evidence, examples and possible solutions as part of a provocatively stated opinion.
Contact Us – Follow Us

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OP-ED WRITING:
A journalist’s perspective

STEVE BUIST
Investigative reporter
Hamilton Spectator
THE PITCH

○ Have a clear idea of the topic you want to discuss.
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○ Make sure it’s topical and relevant to the readers.
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○ Make sure it’s topical and relevant to the readers.
○ Make sure it’s relevant to readers of that particular publication (in other words, explain why it’s of local interest).
THE PITCH

- Explain your expertise in the area you’ll be exploring.
- Use plain language in your pitch. If you can’t explain the pitch in easy-to-understand terms, an editor might be skeptical that you can write your piece in easy-to-understand terms.
THE PITCH

- **TO SUMMARIZE:**
  - Clear idea, clear language;
  - Topical;
  - Of local interest;
  - Your expertise.
TIPS ON EFFECTIVE WRITING

- Focus on one main issue;
- Express a clear opinion, backed by facts and first-hand knowledge;
- Write the way you would speak at a dinner party, not an academic conference;
- Provide context and background so readers understand the significance.
TIPS ON EFFECTIVE WRITING

- Acknowledge the other side of the issue;
- Make the reader care;
- Use anecdotes where possible;
- If you need to use technical language, also use analogies wherever possible to help the reader understand.
TIPS ON EFFECTIVE WRITING

- Use an active voice. Avoid jargon and “academic journalese.” Banish any sentence that would start “It is hoped . . .” or “One would find it evident from the literature . . .”;
- Mix up sentence lengths;
- Have a conclusion. The more direct and succinct, the better.
TIPS ON EFFECTIVE WRITING

- Keep your piece to 750-800 words, and stick to it, for two reasons:

  1. The less work the editor has to do, the happier the editor will be.

  2. Better to self-edit than leave the job to someone else.
Example 1: Introduction

- Climate change is here — and worse than we thought

“When I testified before the Senate in the hot summer of 1988, I warned of the kind of future that climate change would bring to us and our planet. I painted a grim picture of the consequences of steadily increasing temperatures, driven by mankind’s use of fossil fuels.

But I have a confession to make: I was too optimistic.

My projections about increasing global temperature have been proved true. But I failed to fully explore how quickly that average rise would drive an increase in extreme weather.”
Example 1: Analogies

“Twenty-four years ago, I introduced the concept of ‘climate dice’ to help distinguish the long-term trend of climate change from the natural variability of day-to-day weather. Some summers are hot, some cool. Some winters brutal, some mild. That’s natural variability.

But as the climate warms, natural variability is altered, too. In a normal climate without global warming, two sides of the die would represent cooler-than-normal weather, two sides would be normal weather, and two sides would be warmer-than-normal weather. Rolling the die again and again, or season after season, you would get an equal variation of weather over time.

But loading the die with a warming climate changes the odds. You end up with only one side cooler than normal, one side average, and four sides warmer than normal. Even with climate change, you will occasionally see cooler-than-normal summers or a typically cold winter. Don’t let that fool you.”
Example 1: Conclusion

- “There is still time to act and avoid a worsening climate, but we are wasting precious time. We can solve the challenge of climate change with a gradually rising fee on carbon collected from fossil-fuel companies, with 100 per cent of the money rebated to all legal residents on a per capita basis. This would stimulate innovations and create a robust clean-energy economy with millions of new jobs. It is a simple, honest and effective solution.

The future is now. And it is hot.”
Example 2: Introduction

- **Loading the Climate Dice**
- **By Paul Krugman (NY Times, July 22, 2012)**

“A couple of weeks ago the Northeast was in the grip of a severe heat wave. As I write this, however, it’s a fairly cool day in New Jersey, considering that it’s late July. Weather is like that; it fluctuates.

And this banal observation may be what dooms us to climate catastrophe, in two ways. On one side, the variability of temperatures from day to day and year to year makes it easy to miss, ignore or obscure the longer-term upward trend. On the other, even a fairly modest rise in average temperatures translates into a much higher frequency of extreme events — like the devastating drought now gripping America’s heartland — that do vast damage.”
“And so it has proved. As documented in a new paper by Dr. Hansen and others, cold summers by historical standards still happen, but rarely, while hot summers have in fact become roughly twice as prevalent. And 9 of the 10 hottest years on record have occurred since 2000.

But that’s not all: really extreme high temperatures, the kind of thing that used to happen very rarely in the past, have now become fairly common. Think of it as rolling two sixes, which happens less than 3 per cent of the time with fair dice, but more often when the dice are loaded. And this rising incidence of extreme events, reflecting the same variability of weather that can obscure the reality of climate change, means that the costs of climate change aren’t a distant prospect, decades in the future. On the contrary, they’re already here, even though so far global temperatures are only about 1 degree Fahrenheit above their historical norms, a small fraction of their eventual rise if we don’t act.”
Example 2: Conclusion

“Will the current drought finally lead to serious climate action? History isn’t encouraging. The deniers will surely keep on denying, especially because conceding at this point that the science they’ve trashed was right all along would be to admit their own culpability for the looming disaster. And the public is all too likely to lose interest again the next time the die comes up white or blue.

But let’s hope that this time is different. For large-scale damage from climate change is no longer a disaster waiting to happen. It’s happening now.”
Thoughts on Writing Op-Eds

Michael Wolfson
CRC, uOttawa
Basic Choices / Tasks

- selecting a topic / what to write about
- how to write for the op-ed page
- assistance with getting published
Selecting a Topic

- “if it bleeds, it leads” (sigh) → better if linked to something currently controversial
- “big name” – criticizing the PM or government > supporting your neighbour
- “new” – at least one hook to allow the item to be “newsworthy” (e.g. just completed study, new findings)
Selecting a Topic

- “grounded” – not too abstract; needs to connect to something many people are experiencing in their daily lives
- “numbers” – only a few, very simple
How to Write for the Op-Ed

○ read others’ op-eds / notice their style
○ plain language – not the place to show off erudition; rather objective is to communicate your ideas to a thoughtful but non-expert audience
○ basic writing: each paragraph has a topic and closing sentence; short sentences; correct grammar; short paragraphs
How to Write for the OP-Ed II

- punchy: quotable quotes, zingers welcome
- but be careful re quotes out of context
- think through most important points; prioritize
- organize flow so opening paragraph gives a “hook” for the reader – most important / newsworthy point / claim / conclusion
How to Write for the Op-Ed III

- elaborate in subsequent paragraphs
- dance of the 7 veils / peeling the onion: elaborate in steps on the assumption the reader may stop reading at any point in the middle
- end with a punchy sentence
Getting Published

○ Use Evidence Network!
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