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Annenberg Public Policy Center celebrates 20 years, opens a new area of study: Science of Science Communication

PHILADELPHIA – To mark its 20th anniversary, the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania is opening a new area of study, the Science of Science Communication, to investigate how scientific evidence can be more effectively conveyed to the public.

The new area will look at the failure to dispel public controversy over such issues as climate change, vaccinations, and genetically modified organisms despite the presence of valid, compelling and widely accessible scientific evidence.

“There’s a persistent gap between expert knowledge of scientific issues and public perception on myriad issues,” said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC). “Through empirical testing, we will examine ways to close this gap and separate the issues in communicating science from the evidence that is being presented.” She said APPC also will study such issues as the self-correcting nature of science, and whether corrections and retractions contribute to a perception that the science itself is flawed.

In addition, APPC announced that its award-winning FactCheck.org project, which has focused on political speech, has received funding from the Stanton Foundation to expand its mission to include monitoring the use and misuse of scientific evidence in partisan communications.

The new area joins the other fields of study to which the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) is dedicated: political communication, health communication, adolescent risk, and media and the developing child.

Science Communication builds on past projects

The Science of Science Communication builds on past APPC work, including the dissemination of media guidelines for suicide coverage, which was undertaken in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the Surgeon General. It builds as well on the Annenberg Health Communication wiki, a one-stop-shopping site that helps health communicators make better use of state-of-the-art social science. Both were funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The first study in this new area was published in September 2014 in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. The study, conducted by Kathleen Hall Jamieson and APPC senior researcher Bruce W. Hardy, found it was possible to overcome the effects of selectively presented information in partisan media. The research focused on 465 self-identified conservatives who were presented with online Fox News story about the extent of Arctic sea ice.

The study, “Leveraging scientific credibility about Arctic sea ice trends in a polarized political environment,” found that scientists can minimize the likelihood their message will be rejected by avoiding advocacy, relying on trusted sources, and inviting the audience to understand the evidence that justifies the scientific conclusion.

The Annenberg Public Policy Center was founded by Walter and Leonore Annenberg to generate “research that matters.” The center hosted its inaugural event in April 1994, welcoming nearly 40 scholars and government officials from around the world to a two-day conference on the global drug problem. Since then it has informed public policy in civics and mental health, adolescent development and political communication.

The center’s work was instrumental in creation of the Federal Communication Commission’s “three-hour rule,” mandating that stations broadcast at least three hours of educational children’s programs per week. APPC has worked to minimize teen smoking, reduce suicide, and reduce teen pregnancy. In the aftermath of 9/11, the center developed and distributed guidelines for media coverage of terrorism.

FactCheck.org project, founded in 2003, has served as a consumer advocate for voters, reducing the level of deception and confusion in politics and paving the way for others who monitor candidates’ political assertions. The policy center has, as well, contributed to the debate over campaign finance reform, and studied civility in Congress.

APPC also houses the Leonore Annenberg scholarship, fellowship and school funds, which have awarded more than \$13 million to arts fellows, students, and underserved schools.

Current projects

Recent and current work by the policy center includes:

- A series of studies published in Pediatrics that look at the increasing violence in movies, particularly gun violence in movies aimed at youth.
- The creation of the Civics Renewal Network, an alliance of 26 organizations dedicated to civics education, including the Library of Congress, the National Constitution Center, the National Archives, and the U.S. Courts, and the development of a massive open online course on the Constitution through Annenberg Classroom taught by Penn law professor Kermit Roosevelt.
- The creation of a task force that studied the dysfunctional oversight of the Department of Homeland Security by Congress, and an ongoing effort to urge Congress to improve national security by streamlining its supervision of DHS.
- The convening of a blue-ribbon group, including presidential campaign managers and debate coaches, to recommend ways to improve the presidential debate process for 2016.
- A partnership with NBC News and the Wall Street Journal to conduct surveys of the electorate on issues involving Congress, the president and the judiciary.

The 20th anniversary was marked by a luncheon at the policy center on Thursday, Oct. 16, and the start of a three-day conference on the Science of Science Communication. The day also was celebrated with the 2014 Annenberg lecture at the Annenberg School for Communication,

delivered by lawyer Floyd Abrams, one of the leading legal authorities on the First Amendment and the U.S. Constitution, on “The First Amendment and Campaign Finance.”

The policy center is based on the University of Pennsylvania campus in a four-story building designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Fumihiko Maki. It opened its doors in August 2009.

For more information on the Annenberg Public Policy Center, visit our website:

<http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/>

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