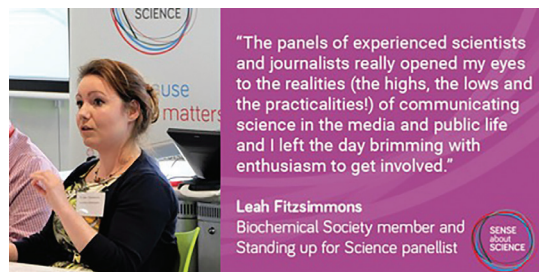


Why it's never too early to start Standing up for Science

Anastasia Skamaruskas
(Sense about Science)

The Voice of Young Science (VoYS) network hosts Standing up for Science workshops around the country and, more recently, across Europe. We bring together researchers who've engaged with the media and the public, local and national journalists, and communications and policy experts to encourage early career researchers to make their voices heard in public debates about science.

VoYS is run by the campaigning charity Sense about Science. Our remit is the public: we equip people to ask for evidence when they come across claims; we give the public access to scientists; we advocate for transparency and openness in policymaking and work with researchers and interest groups to communicate controversial and difficult issues like children's heart surgery data and nuclear energy. In short we work to ensure the public interest in sound science and evidence is recognised in public discussion and policymaking.



Leah came to a Standing up for Science workshop a few years ago and has since become a champion for the VoYS network. She is now a regular panellist at our workshops and was on our 'nuts & bolts' panel at a recent Standing up for Science workshop in Coventry. Leah followed panels of journalists and media savvy scientists with a clear message for early career researchers: "Make your voices heard in public discussions and stand up for science."

"It's been a busy few years, but I've learned so much and I've even been awarded prizes from my University for outreach, all because I went to a Standing up for Science workshop!"

Leah Fitzsimmons, Biochemical Society and VoYS member, Standing up for Science panellist and Ask for Evidence ambassador

So why early career researchers?

When Sense about Science first started in 2002, media scare stories – from the MMR wars to mobile phones 'frying your brain' – were rife, and public confidence in science was at an all-time low. This was the subject of a 2000 House of Lords report on Science and Society. One of the issues highlighted in that report was the scarcity of scientists willing to speak out and the isolation and lack of support for the handful that did. We set out to change that: to advocate and support the public interest in sound science and to encourage scientists to participate in public discussion. Scientific evidence can be a powerful tool for insight, accountability and change. Yet public life often revolves around claims based on poor or misrepresented evidence: risks are hidden or exaggerated, policies are based on anecdotes instead of analysis, scientific studies are taken out of context or distorted. When evidence is misrepresented, misunderstood or hidden, our ability to make the best decisions for ourselves and society and to hold those in power to account, is diminished.

We went out and asked scientists what their concerns about standing up for science were and found early career researchers had a lot of reservations:

"I don't have time".

"I'm worried about being misquoted".

"The public isn't interested in my research".

"I'm not an expert".

Any of these sound familiar? We created the Standing up for Science workshops to address issues just like these and break down barriers between early career researchers and the public. The VoYS network is now an active and dynamic community of more than 2000 researchers who take responsibility for their research in the public

discussion, tackle misunderstanding of scientific issues and run amazing campaigns on everything from weather misconceptions to homeopathy.

“Meeting other like-minded people really generated a united front to stand up for science! It gave support and helped to further encourage my activities.”

Hayley Moulding, Biochemical Society and VoYS member.

It's never too early to start

Our workshops are interactive; we focus on the questions and issues from the researchers in the room. We encourage attendees to share their media experiences, both good and bad. Hearing from others helps give VoYS members the confidence to become champions for engaging with the wider public discussion. Panellists give tips on how to make sure you get off on the right footing.

It's not unusual to hear from a PhD student who, having been named as an author on a paper, got thrown in at the deep end with press calls and a live studio interview. Sometimes they've felt the frustration of a headline or an article not quite getting the research right. Or seen coverage and realised that something is missing from that discussion that they could have added, for instance, that the study was done in mice and may not equate in humans, or how that study fits in with the wider body of evidence.

Now imagine those same scenarios except the researcher had talked to journalists before; knew what they wanted out of a story and had been able to do some preparation. Even as simple as going to their university press office and asking them for some training. Suddenly speaking to the wider public discussion isn't so intimidating.

Get involved

Have we convinced you yet? Our workshops are free, open to early career researchers across STEM and social sciences and are held throughout the year and across the country. If you are a member of a partner organization like the Biochemical Society you get priority places to our workshops. The next one is in London on 30 November.

The VoYS network has also taken on a life of its own, running dynamic campaigns which have made a real impact; highlighting the lack of evidence behind claims made by detox products, drawing attention to dodgy nutrition with a spoof diets quiz featured in the *Daily Mail* and calling on the WHO to condemn the use of homeopathy for serious diseases in developing countries. The WHO responded to that open letter stating clearly that it does not recommend the use of homeopathy for treating HIV, TB, malaria, influenza and infant diarrhoea.



VoYS members discuss the barriers to standing up for science at a workshop in Warwick

Just as importantly, here just a few examples of what individual VoYS members have gone on to do after coming along to a workshop:

Getting research out to public audiences and tackling misunderstanding: Hana Pearce was on East Leeds FM's 'Science Matters' show talking about her research as well as the VoYS 'Haven't the Foggiest' campaign that flags up the misuse of meteorological terms in the media.

Being part of public engagement initiatives to communicate critical thinking and scientific concepts: Biochemical Society member Hayley Moulding has been invited to the Welsh Government to hold talks, is the communications co-coordinator for the British Science Association, Cardiff Branch and organized the Beautiful Minds sessions of Pint of Science, Cardiff. She said: "I can honestly say VoYS contributed to my confidence and understanding to be able to undertake these projects".

Promoting evidence-based policymaking and involving the public: Biochemical Society member Esther Odekunle helped bring EU citizens from all walks of life to the European parliament to tell MEPs why evidence matters to them ■

The VoYS network is open to early career researchers in STEM and social sciences. Join on our website or by coming along to a workshop and become part of this exciting network growing across Europe.

If you are interested in attending the Standing up for Science workshop on 30 November, please contact our Policy Officer Emma Sykes (Emma.Sykes@biochemistry.org).