TRANSFORMING SCIENCE COVERAGE IN THE GENERAL MEDIA
Monday, May 13, 2013, 5-6.30 pm
32-D462 (Star Room, Stata Center, MIT)
Free and open to the public; advance registration is required: bit.ly/MITtransformmedia

When Charles Darwin published The Origin of the Species, many of his readers were not scientists. Today the primary scientific literature is read almost exclusively by specialists even though the implications of scientific research are far-reaching. The non-specialist public can stay abreast of advances in research only through the filter of the media.

We believe the current system is broken. Though the media serves a vital function by translating the research literature into generally accessible terms, articles in influential news outlets often contain factual inaccuracies, insufficient evaluation of the methods used to obtain certain data, and limited, if any, presentation of opposing viewpoints or the inherent unreliability of preliminary results. More problematic is that studies of marginal scientific importance or reliability too often receive outsized coverage, which can confuse or mislead readers who look to science to make decisions about their health, diet, fitness, or parenting choices**.** Though scientists are intellectually well positioned to help resolve these issues of accuracy and focus, they are rarely equipped with the necessary communication skills. Just as the highly technical nature of scientific research poses formidable challenges to journalists, so does the complexity and uncertainty of the scientific process pose formidable communication challenges for scientists. There is room for improvement on both sides.

We envision a system in which writers and editors partner closely with professional scientists to produce scientific coverage—from selecting which stories are covered to making final edits. Such a system would require significant transformations of the culture, norms, and incentives in both the science and journalism communities. However, we believe that the voting public, and those who set policy, deserve and require a greater understanding of the scientific research that the nation funds. The science community would benefit as well, as coverage that embraces the complexity and uncertainty inherent to the scientific process would promote both support for research as well as scientific literacy. This would also guard against backlashes that may arise from unrealistic expectations of what science can deliver.

This event will be hosted by the three current leaders of NeuWrite, a writing group composed of research scientists and professional writers, originally based in New York. Over the past five years the group has experimented, on a small scale, with models for writer-scientist collaboration. We are currently developing strategies for exporting these models across the media landscape.

At this workshop we will briefly present a few broad principles, and then break into three smaller groups for discussion. We are seeking to hear the opinions of participants in the science, writing/editing, and policy communities about what can be improved in the public representation of scientific research, and how to go about it.

Schedule:

5.00 5.20 Presentation
5.20 6.15 Workshops (simultaneous)
1. Scientist involvement in media coverage of their fields
2. Metrics for evaluating science communication
3. Incentive structures in science and the media
6.15 6.30 Q&A

Hosts:

Rebecca Brachman is a doctoral candidate in neuroscience at Columbia University, where she studies the molecular biology of psychiatric disorders. In addition to neuroscience, she also holds a bachelor's degree in creative writing, and briefly pursued a career in playwriting and screenwriting before returning to the bench. She has co-directed NeuWrite since 2012.

Tim Requarth is an NIH National Research Service Award fellow and doctoral candidate in neuroscience at Columbia University, where he studies sensory processing in electric fish. His work has appeared in publications such as *The New York Times, The New Republic, Scientific American, Science,* and *Current Opinion in Neurobiology*. He has co-directed NeuWrite since 2009.

Carl Schoonover is a neuroscientist at Columbia University where he studies the sense of touch with the goal of elucidating basic principles of neural circuit processing in the mammalian cortex. He is the author of *Portraits of the Mind*, and has written for *The New York Times*, *Le Figaro*, and *Scientific American* and is a cofounder of NeuWrite.