

Transcript

Julia Macpherson (JM): Welcome to Arctic Minded, a podcast where we discuss life, work and research in the Arctic. Arctic Minded is produced by ArcticNet, a Network of Centers of Excellence of Canada that brings together scientists, engineers and other professionals in the human health, natural and social sciences with partners from Inuit organizations, northern communities, federal and provincial agencies, as well as the private sector, to study the impacts of climate and socioeconomic change in the Canadian North. From coast to coast to coast, we recognize that our work reaches across the ancestral and unceded territories of all the Inuit, Métis and First Nations people that call these lands home and who have been protectors of and share connections with these lands since time immemorial. Today's episode of Arctic Minded is called Curiosity: The Intersection of Science and Journalism. The importance of communicating your research has become prevalent in the world of scientists. Yet we often hear of the same barriers, like I don't have the proper training or I don't have the time. But something that's often overlooked when listing all the reasons not to communicate is that there are people who sold jobs to help you do just this. Hi. I'm one of them. And our guest today is an even better one. Dustin Patar is an Iqaluit-based visual journalist who focuses on the Arctic. His work has appeared in Canadian Geographic, the Globe and Mail, the Canadian Press, the Narwhal, CBC North and others. Dustin has an undergraduate degree in communications from Simon Fraser University in British Columbia and a Masters of Journalism from the University of British Columbia. When he's not in front of a computer, he can be found behind a sewing machine, fixing a snowmobile or out on the land. Today, Dustin and I are going to talk about the parallels between science and journalism. He's going to share what led him to the opportunities that led him to become interested in science journalism, working in the Arctic and what it's like for him to work with scientists to help communicate the impact of their work.

JM: I'm super excited to have you as a guest today so that we can explore a topic that's not so much science focused as much as my previous episodes. Journalists play a really important role in sharing science and helping share stories of people living in the Arctic through journalism and through storytelling. So can you start by sharing what led you to become a journalist.

Dustin Patar (DP): Yeah. So, I've always had an interest in telling stories. You know, when I was a kid growing up, I always wanted to make movies. I was obsessed with movies. You know, I've borrowed my parents' camcorder when I was younger like as young as I remember, just to, like, shoot things and yeah. Try to tell stories and make movies. That kind of continued through high school and I did wind up going to film school for a time. I didn't really love, you know, working on traditional film sets, like I was in Vancouver essentially. And, you know, I had a chance to work on big TV shows and things like that. As, you know, a lowly production assistant, but still kind of an intro to that world. So, after kind of first year motion picture production, I was like, I don't really feel this, so I wound up going into documentary filmmaking, which is another year long program and I love the idea of being able to tell stories that, you know, really exist. These are real people, real activities and things like that. I think that at the time I felt a little bit lost in terms of what kind of stories I wanted to tell, but I'd like the idea of it and then I kind of just went off and lived life for a while. And we'll fast forward several years, many years now, and I decided to go back to school after living a life for a bit. I got a degree in communications, which is like, really broad, certainly useful in terms of, again, understanding things like audience and you know, effective communication strategies. Not just like in you know as a press release type thing, but as you know being understood and essentially telling stories, I mean storytelling is communication, but it was still too broad.

And the idea of kind of like doing documentaries - How can you kind of do that as a profession? And I wasn't necessarily going to go just jump into the documentary filmmaking, so journalism kind of seemed like a perfect fit to take all these skills that I've acquired and like kind of packages them really nicely, which is why I went into the Master's program at UBC and it did pretty much just that. It took everything and kind of, let's say, catapulted me in that journalism direction and along the way, there were other kind of key moments that led to that. So back in I wanna say 2014, I was working in a white water rafting company just as like an office manager in Squamish. And I saw like a Grand Canyon question mark, sticky note in the office and I was like yeah, that'd be cool. I wonder who's like planning this trip in the in the office. And there wasn't anyone. But there was an opportunity to volunteer with the United States Geological Survey on some of their science work that they were doing in there. And, you know, my bosses who wrote the sticky note connected me with the person who was doing that work and one thing led to another and you know a couple months after that I found myself in the Grand Canyon, you know, on these giant rafts doing science. I don't have a science background whatsoever. I didn't take science in high school or anything like that, so it was like this is really cool. Like, I wish I could like watch this or read about this in in some level beyond like maybe an academic paper, which is kind of like where their work ultimately led. I brought a camera with me, you know, still taking photos. Just likw point and shoot, and it's like this is cool. And then I had this like kind of like I want to go back and like actually like try to do this correctly and a couple of years later while I was doing my undergrad and I went back and was like, I kind of tried to, you know, I never published it anywhere but I took the photos I, you know, sat down with the people on the trip and asked questions. And it was like, this is really cool. So I think that like that whole experience was something like ohh I like as a journalist, I could do this and it doesn't have to necessarily be just this trip and it's just like, wow, that's a career opportunity. Like sweet, let's do it. So yeah, it was a few moments like that. But that's how I think I wound up in journalism.

JM: Yeah. So, you mentioned wanting to share stories of real people and real activities. And then I guess joining in on this field work has kind of got you starting to thinking about maybe science communication, and I think it's interesting how you said that you don't have a background in science, but have found that to be really interesting, like the field of science communication. I'm kind of the other side of the coin. I'm trained as a scientist. I did my bachelors and my masters in biology. Now as kind of working in knowledge mobilization and science communication, we seem to have ended up at the same point where it's like, how do we share stories about science to the public and how do we make them accessible and how do we find the people to do this? Because it's not just a one-sided thing, scientists need journalists to help them share their stories, but journalists also need scientists to get the information. So, what has it been like for you trying to kind of get into this field and the one side of that equation?

DP: I never kind of went into it with the science communication necessarily. I only saw, you know, a bigger story, you know, for example, for like, the Grand Canyon. I mean the southwest is in a huge drought, has been for a long time. And I kind of wanted to see... that was one of the questions. You know, I was reading stuff about that in the news. And I was like, well, I wonder how the scientists that I had met years earlier, how they feel about this or how this impacts the things that they're studying. And I think that more broadly, in journalism, it's about, you know, being curious. And I think that probably goes for science as well and I think very kind of broadly. and this was. I had discussions about this recently while I was doing a story, we could talk about that a bit later, but you realize how many parallels science and journalism have in terms of gathering information, you know, analyzing it, processing it and then sharing it. On a very like surface level, certainly, and obviously depending on the project, journalism or science, there could be

a lot more similarities. But I kind of fell into science. I've always had a passion for the outdoors and at one point, you know, I had a fellowship with ECCC, Environment and Climate Change Canada, and it was a project basically tracking the flyway. But you know, I got paired with various wildlife biologists. I think ornithologists and we were all over BC talking with different people about like kind of their research. And I think what I've largely found even you know from the Grand Canyon on, is scientists have always been really keen to share. I think that you know, obviously that's part of their mission. This is another avenue for sharing work and here you have someone that's, you know, maybe asking stupid questions, but those are the questions that, you know the audience is going to have for me, sometimes it's a very obvious one. You know, there's various ways of asking this but, you know, it's a question I almost always try to ask a scientist, and this isn't to, you know, I'm not trying to invalidate your work. But why is what you're doing important? Like who should care about this and why? Because I have to somehow explain that in the story. Because it's the first question that I know that you know an audience would want to know, especially if it's kind of a little bit more obscure. Some things are like, OK, yes, that's very clear. I don't think anyone needs to understand this anymore than they already do. But certainly, in some cases they do. So, yeah I think just being curious and wanting to know how things work and I think probably because I didn't have a science background, I made some sort of an assumption at some point that like scientists just knew everything and everything was explainable. And then when I started to like actually spend time with them in the field, I would be like, well, what happens if this happens to that? and they're like, well, that's a really good question and that's something we want to look at and it's like ohh, so like there's a you answer one question and then there's kind of like a follow up question then there's like then you start to go into like the equivalent of a Wikipedia rabbit hole. And honestly, journalism's kind of the same thing. And you can kind of keep chasing it and you know something I struggle with sometimes is not veering too far off course with the story. And, you know, things need to be a little bit more bite sized. And I think science might be in terms of like, reading papers, they're very specific. And I always really like that. I've gotten a lot more in depth, obviously, at reading scientific papers, which is, you know, how I will try to find stories or connect with scientists. Or I'll read several, you know, scientific papers before even sitting down with the scientists. So I'm not going in completely blind, which I think at least in my experience has always been appreciated. It's like, oh, ok, so you kind of have, like, a sense of left and right, which is helpful because then I mean, that also means I'll ask better questions, and I'm able to think journalistically about science, which is always fun.

JM: I think everything that you just said I agree with and is very interesting. So, for example, like I mentioned, like my formal education has been in science and something that I always had been aware of was, I find when you're being trained as a researcher to do science, the final communication output is usually that publication in a journal, which is fine, except that those aren't always accessible and another issue is that usually that communication output is for another scientist to read to support their papers or whatever their research they're working. So it's fine to bridge scientist to scientist, but everybody's life is impacted by the natural environment and all the science that we're studying. So, how are we communicating from scientists to the public, from scientists to policymakers, from scientists to community members, if you're doing research in a community which often time in Arctic science, you are and should be communicating back to the community. So I think, yeah, in my experience and you know, in my career, that's what's led me to this position. It's just like that so what factor like, why is all this research important beyond, ah, this will support the claim that X does impact Y for this reason, this reason, this reason, and now we're going to use that information to answer the next question, and kind of go down that rabbit hole. Like you said, we're just asking a never ending list of questions which are important

and help us understand the world a little bit more. But so what? What's the ultimate point of this research, and especially if it's affecting people, then we need journalism to help share it, and I think again, Arctic science is the perfect example of this with the climate crisis. You know, climate change isn't just something that scientists study because it seems spooky and we have all these issues and impacts coming our way in the near future. There are real people living right now whose everyday lives are being affected by climate change severely. And what are we doing about it as scientists and how are we letting them know what's happening around them every single day and how it's going to change how they learn, how they eat, how they hunt all these things... So. Yeah, I guess that's just my quick little my take on things because I think especially in the context of climate change and especially for people living in the North, journalism is very, very important to help convey the severity of climate change impacts that are taking place in the North, to the rest of the world. Also because it is quite a remote place and I find a lot of people have kind of this out of sight, out of mind, perspective on the Arctic, where it's like, yeah, I know there's people living there. I know that it exists. I know that there are communities. But it's not very represented in a lot of media, I think. So, it's great that people like you are trying to shine more light on those communities and some stories about what's happening up there and really giving humanity back, like giving that idea of humanity back into science, I think is really important and we know the perfect example of this is also the COVID-19 pandemic. I think that was the first time that I realized, OK, journalism is key, but journalism that's.. how do I say this... not fact checked, but that is representing accurate science is super, super important. And that's like one of the best examples I think of why we need journalism. Because it's again, not everybody is comfortable reading a scientific paper to have their questions answered, so...

DP: And I think kind of on that note... You know, obviously things like methods are always part of a scientific paper. And how is this done? You know, not everyone always wants to see how the sausage is made, but I think it also lends on a public placing level, It lends a certain like ohh these are real people and this is how they are doing the things that are feeding the headlines ultimately, you know. So like, ohh they conduct this, they check this every year, and that's how they know that these changes have happened and it's not some arbitrary scientists are just running a headline and now the ice is melting faster like there's a lot of work and actual people. And I think you kind of mentioned that that humanization of course of communities, but also like of scientists. Like scientists are, if you don't already know, they're a lot like you and me and everyone else and they have interests and they're not just... They like sports and all these other things, and they play video games and you know, they get bored, they get frustrated and trying to, like, show that in some of the work that I've done, it's always like, you know, it's easier to understand that... it's going to sound funny, but it's easier to understand that it's real people behind this, they don't have ill intentions or you know they're passionate about getting this information out and this is the way that they do the work. And I've started to address that I think a little bit more. You know... they're playing backgammon in the tent because we're weathered out. It seems like a kind of a random photo to take on a scientific expedition. But like, that's what was happening. Like, that's what they do.

JM: On the note of scientific expeditions, you got to take a trip on the Amundsen, which is really cool. What was that like?

DP: So, I wanted to do that for a long time. The pandemic obviously put a decent axe in that plan for several years, so being able to finally go on it back in October was incredible. It's one of those things that... I typically think of things visually, visual journalists. And you know, I tried to watch and look at pictures as much as I could to try to understand kind of again what life was like. And like, OK, so you know I've been told that you know where it happens around the clock. What does that actually look like? And you know,

various bits of media here and there kind of address that on some level, but again, you know, being a curious person, I want to see what that look like. What does you know, how does this data feed into again some of the headlines that we pretty continuously see. How do you handle areas that are under studied? You know, at one point early on in kind of my communications, journalism career, there was a scientist that said it's not how you handle what you know, it's how you handle what you don't know. And I kind of always... that's an approach I take to journalism, but it's like, OK, well, where do you even start with the scientific process sometimes and how does that kind of feed into those next steps? And you know, I have those questions by the end I left being like, oh, this is what they're going to do next and then they wanna look at this because of that and that other thing they found. And yeah, it was a it was a great experience. I think it was also one of those times where the longer than I'm in the North, I sometimes forget what people don't realize about the North, if that makes sense. So, I mean it was October and you know as the climate changes, ice comes in later and later. So ,you know, should there have been ice when we departed Resolute at least forming? From what I understand, yeah, you know, 20 years ago there would have been. There wasn't and you know, we saw some snow here there, but you know, people are like ohh, what was it like going through the Arctic? And I was like, honestly, you couldn't really even tell that it wasn't the Arctic until you looked at the map. At least from, you know, when you're standing on the bridge and you're looking out. So, I think that that's for some people often some scientists maybe that had never been to the North and were expecting something that... You know, they've seen some pictures and yeah, when we look at, you know, pictures, you look at the Arctic, you're gonna see a lot of ice. Is it always that? No. Is is often that? Yes. But I mean, I think like what you said earlier is the amount of visual resources and the amount of stories that are especially connected with science coming out of the North, especially the Canadian Arctic, are quite limited. So again, I was like ohh... You know, people are gonna say this is an icebreaker and there's not a single photo of ice in this story. What is that? How do you reconcile that? But that's part of the story, right?

JM: So how does an opportunity like that even come about? Like, are you contacted by a scientist saying, hey, like, come document this important work that we're doing or how does that work?

DP: It's always different for each kind of project, so for the Amundsen, I had been in touch with them several years in a row being like, hey, like, are you letting journalists on? Nope. Hey, are you letting journalists on this year? Nope. And then this year, I think I probably reached out last February or March and was like, hey - and they're like, yep, this year we are. It's like, perfect. OK, like, how do we get this process started then? It was a bit of a back and forth. Things can be sometimes tough when you're a freelancer and you're like, OK well. I'm looking for a story like tentatively the access is there. OK, so what kind of work is being done on these legs? Which legs are available and then basically they'll take that, do research, try to conduct maybe some pre interviews with some people that will be on it that can explain a little bit more about the work they're doing and then I will try to put a pitch together and then pitch it. Now obviously various publications produce things differently and some are more kind of after the fact. Some won't really touch it unless they've, you know, agreed to do something ahead of time. So, this was it was a bit of a different process on for the Amundsen, but everything kind of worked out and you know, I had a few people or a few publications come aboard. At the time I had just been working with CBC as a video journalist in Iqaluit and so CBC North picked up, you know, a short doc and a couple little radio docs, and then a couple weeks before we went up setting sail, the Globe and Mail had signed on. So, I wound up doing that piece with them. I like to have a pretty clear story like dialed in, which was the case you know, when I did in in July 2022, when I went up to Grise Fiord in northern Ellesmere Island, like I had

written about the collapse of an ice shelf in 2020, when I worked at Nunatsiaq, you know, I'd maintain contact and bugged Derek Mueller for a couple years being like, are you going up like, is there gonna be room? You know, that was a very clear, like, OK well, this is going to be the first time they're going back and after the pandemic delay, so like that was a very clear story, but again, it's still like, am I gonna have access? If I'm gonna have access do they need a publication to be signed on? There's a lot of like logistical steps, but it's the process has never been the same really so far, to be honest, which is fine. That's part of the fun and the dread of being a freelance journalist for sure.

JM: Yeah, I mean, I imagine it would be hard to be fully, fully prepared going on board the Amundsen to have a complete understanding of all the different projects that are being worked on there. But, yeah, I'm jealous. That sounds like a really, really cool expedition to have the chance to join. Like you said earlier, that most of the scientists that you talked to seem willing to talk to you and willing to answer your questions. I will say that in my limited experience, I've actually found this to be a struggle. Just getting scientists to kind of take that extra step to communicate again beyond just that final journal publication. So how was it for you being a journalist aboard that ship with a lot of scientists? Like, did you find that the attitudes were generally positive around having you there?

DP: Well, I feel like they had no room to run away. I would see you every day in the like cafeteria. I suppose the mouse hole. Yeah, so. Yeah, there was nowhere to run. But. I mean, joking aside, no everyone was pretty open to it cause for a story like the Amundsen, you know, it was the shortest leg of last year's expedition, but it was still 3 weeks. You know everyone is, you know, the first couple of days it's a bit frantic, you know. Everyone's settling in. Obviously there's the veterans who are like, yeah, I've done this before and there's the people that are like I get lost every time I leave my cabin. And that was me. Like I have a good sense of direction, but not on that ship, apparently. And it was nice though, because like, I wouldn't necessarily even try to pull the camera out or like, do interviews. I would just be there, like almost get acclimatized and then then I'm just like, OK, well, now I'm gonna be on deck, and I'm gonna take photos and like, people see me and like, obviously I introduce myself like on the first day and hey, I'm a journalist blah blah blah. But I think that just by watching, I'm a big... again, I'm a visual person, so I'm just kind of watching, OK, this is the process and then, you know, when I don't understand something or I think I understand something, I'll ask, you know, is this what's happening? And they're like yea. OK, cool. Like, just listen and learn that way, and then you can kind of start to, like, have those conversations and you know that's a luxury of time and you know, obviously also not being able to go anywhere. I mean, the Amundsen, the work is quite repetitive, you know station to station. So you start to like have an understanding and you can kind of see the process you know on good days and bad days. But yeah, everyone was quite willing to explain you know how it is, you know what they're doing. Which is really nice.

JM: I want to go back to something that you said earlier. And just saying like, just talking about what people don't really realize about the North, but a lot of the articles that you've put out are focused in the Arctic. So, do you feel like you have, like, a particular likeness towards the Arctic, or do you feel like it's just a bit of an underrepresented area and you feel drawn to want to share these stories? What kind of leads you to focus... I guess you said that you were hired by somewhere in Iqaluit. So I guess that would mean you would focus mostly on stories in the North, but how do you feel about them now? Like do you feel drawn to them?

DP: Yeah, I definitely feel drawn to them, but I think that everywhere has its reporting challenges, and I've, you know, I've had the opportunity to report in a number of different places, North America and abroad. And the Arctic definitely presents challenges, but I think that, you know, as someone who lives there and has lived there now for 4 1/2 years, which that's not a long time by any means. But it's been enough for me to look at the way that it's covered typically by people that aren't from there. Or not necessarily from there, but like when there's a story and it's like, well, they wrote that in an office in some big metropolitan city. They've never been there. I realize that there's a certain amount of news that that's just how it works, but you start to see things.... like there are tropes. I'll try not to rant about this too much, but you know I don't want to read a story that starts off in on a cold, frigid wasteland. Sure, maybe that's what you see, especially if that's your first time there. But like, that's not the reality, at least not the reality that I see, not the reality that I think a lot of people that live in the North see, so the way that the Arctic I think is portrayed either by people that come up for a day or two and then leave, or by people that have done a story without ever actually being there... I'm not a huge fan of, and that's not to say there aren't people out there, other journalists doing great work there. There absolutely are. But that's a public perception, it changes the way that like you said earlier, the rest of Canada or the world perceives a place that's a part of this country that they're just not familiar with whatsoever. I think that, you know, there are, there are other kind of tropes out there and I will say that you know when, especially when we talk about climate change, sometimes we look at wildlife and I think that such a heavy focus on wildlife sometimes misses the point that there are people that live there and the changing climate is impacting them as much, maybe if not more than some of these key Arctic wildlife species that they also rely on. If I can help change that, I try to. You know, for example, when I did the story couple years ago about last January, in April 2022, you know again. A bunch of dog teams on the ice with skidoos and, like support teams, you know, traveling 500 kilometers on ice, that's not a familiar thing to Canadians, to most people anywhere, really. So, if I can try to, you know, not necessarily highlight the differences. The differences are obvious. Like look at a photo. Yes. OK. But there are similarities that are far more common than I think people think. And yeah, try to highlight those and whether that's, you know, kids on the sea ice during a dog sled race or scientists playing Guitar Hero on the Amundsen... like those are relatable. That's the way into some of these stories. It's a people story for people and that's the way I kind of like to view that, I guess.

JM: Yeah, totally. I think the keyword there is relatable, like you said because... I don't want to sound daunting, but you know, unfortunately, people in the North are facing the realities of climate change every day. And it's one thing for us in the South to look at pictures and read stories from journalism, from journalists about that. But it'll be something else when we're able to relate to it because we are now experiencing those same climate change impacts in the South. So personally, I think that journalism is just going to become more important in especially the field of climate science and Arctic science.

DP: I think that you know all the ideas that the you know, a general public wants to see... Those are things like when I'm writing a story, like a science-based story, you know, I'll read through the papers obviously at the start before I do pre interviews and you know try to familiarize myself with you know that world. But again, the world that I communicate to is not that world. Does that mean that when I'm, you know, writing something, you know, after I come back from the Amundsen, when I come back from the fiord, I'll still look at those papers and you know, try to see if now I have a different understanding having experienced that work and how can I convey that to the audience? And I think a lot of those chunks that I try to convey are actually in the academic papers. They just exist in a slightly different way that I interpret

and then share and sometimes it could be as simple as a photo. You know, how was this data collected? Well, we did this. OK, well, that's a photo. And people will be like ohh yeah, no, that net does that. It's a little caption, you know and people are always curious about this kind of thing. That's probably one of the reasons they're reading a story like this, and I try to make the audience work in some form, you know, so maybe a picture that they don't quite understand. And then like, what is going on and then the caption tried to answer and it's like they kind of get the whole experience of science as well. And that sense of like question, answer. Ohh. Well then they think about something else and maybe that's answered later on in the story. So again, it really all ties back down to like the parallels, I think between science and journalism.

JM: A big thank you to Dustin for sharing his experiences and unique insight to science communication. Working at the intersection of communication and science can be incredibly difficult. Finding the how and what to communicate to inform an audience takes time, skill and cooperation. Yet, as Dustin pointed out, the parallels between journalism and science are clear. At the end of the day, aren't we all working towards the same goal of uncovering truths? Although we have received different training, have lived different experiences and work in very different settings, the drive is the same: curiosity. Once again, a big thank you to Dustin for his time, and until next time my name is Julia Macpherson and this has been Arctic Minded.