





Steps Towards Transparency in Science Communication Labour in India

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Abstract We, a group of individuals involved with science communication in India, have been set back by the lack of standardisation or openness regarding remuneration being offered for science communication services. To make this information available to the public, especially to the growing fraternity of science communicators in India, we conducted an online survey. We designed it to collect relevant data pertaining to the central question: Is science communication labour compensated fairly in India? We received responses from 123 individuals, and have released the data publicly. The results of our analysis are presented here. We noticed a workforce that is highly educated, but relatively young in terms of work experience in science communication. The body of responses point to a situation of gross underpayment and non-uniformity, affecting both full-time professionals and freelancers. The salaries being received by full-time professionals are not particularly correlated with factors such as educational qualification and work experience. We expect future surveys or in-depth studies of the data we collected to explain the gap. We have also launched a new public form aimed at crowd-sourcing information about freelancer remuneration. Responses to this form will be added to a public database that will equip freelancers with the information they need to protect themselves from being under-compensated.

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1. Introduction

Science communication is broadly defined as the practice of communicating scientific ideas, principles, methodologies, research, and findings to non-specialist (or non-expert) audiences. This includes topics falling under the ambit of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). With an aim to inform, educate, entertain, or inspire, science communication has, over the years, evolved to become an essential component of public discourse. Using various mediums, communication styles, and tools, science communication professionals bridge the gap between science and society.

Science communication includes written forms (articles, blogs), audio-visual outputs (podcasts, documentaries, animations, videos), digital communications (social media, websites), illustrations (graphics, doodles, comics), events (festivals, exhibitions, conferences, workshops), public/community engagement activities, and more. Science communication is no longer restricted to the “traditional sciences”, but has also developed a niche for the interdisciplinary understanding of sciences with social sciences and humanities. Science communication has also found its way into the public discourse around science and technology policy [1].

Science communication professionals are constantly innovating their craft in order to make scientific knowledge more engaging and accessible for a non-expert audience.

Communicating science to a layperson is challenging work. It requires active learning, and often involves walking a tightrope of explaining complex ideas in simpler ways without conveying anything beyond or different from the scientific knowledge. Maintaining accuracy of the information while simplifying it is a specifically daunting task, but sci-

ence communicators have to go one step ahead and make the material palatable and interesting for the general public. In India, a country where most scientific research is publicly funded, high quality science communication is even more critical. Without it, public engagement with science becomes nearly impossible.

Yet, there is little recognition of the science communicator’s expertise. Science communication professionals find themselves constantly justifying their place, making a case for their work, wherever they go. Sometimes, it includes convincing researchers to make their work accessible. At other times, it involves encouraging members of the public to consume credible scientific knowledge and increase scientific literacy. Science communicators do not just communicate science, they also carry the burden of advancing the cause for science communication.

Science communication, or ‘SciComm’, is work. Science communicators, or ‘SciComms’, are people who are passionate about the exercise and they deserve fair compensation for their work. Their labour requires cognitive and emotional involvement that is both rewarding in terms of values and outcomes. The labour is challenging beyond what is measurable by monetary compensation and deserves formal recognition, adequate financial reimbursement, and social security.

For the scope of this report, SciComm encompasses all roles that have to do with the ecosystem of taking science to a layperson audience. We realise that definitions are vague, but for the purpose of analysis, we have trusted in the survey respondents’ ability to self-identify if their work falls under the definition of SciComm.

If employees are not conscious of the value of their labour, they are vulnerable to exploitation. Employers may use the

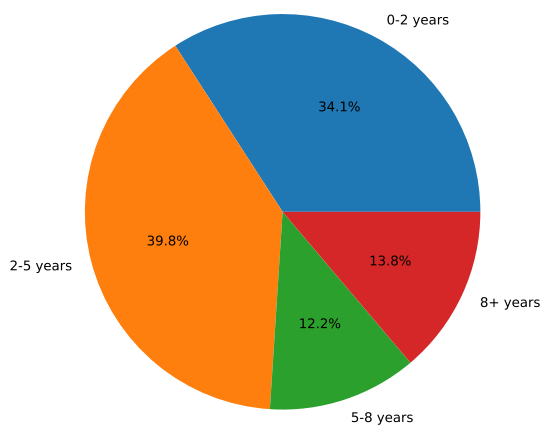


FIGURE 1. Pie-chart showing the distribution of work experience among the 123 survey respondents. More than 50% of the respondents record having less than 5 years of experience, implying that the field of work in India is relatively young.

lack of transparent knowledge of remuneration to shortchange employees. A simple but powerful way to improve the situation of the Indian SciComm ecosystem is to make accessible information on how well different kinds of work gets compensated.

As individuals with different levels of experience in SciComm, we have felt the lack of such open information troubling. Conversations around jobs and compensation in Indian SciComm were observed on a WhatsApp Community called the ‘SciComm India Hub’, which consists of 200+ practitioners and enthusiasts. These were some of our takeaways from the discussions on the forum:

- Considering the lack of remuneration-related information in the public domain, folks are unsure if pursuing SciComm in India is a sustainable career option.
- Existing SciComm practitioners are unsure of average salaries in the ecosystem, due to which they are unable to demand compensations that are commensurate with their responsibilities.
- The correlation between education, work experience, and compensation in SciComm is unclear.

In response to this scenario, we conducted an online survey (now closed). The immediate goal of the survey was to provide a space for SciComm practitioners to be transparent about their salary information. The results in its entirety would serve as a useful resource for them in multiple scenarios:

1. for job applicants to refer while negotiating their salary with a new employer;
2. for practitioners to gain clarity about how fairly they are being compensated by their current employer;
3. for employers to take cognisance and improve their compensation habits if needed.

2. Disclaimers

We envisaged, formulated, and disseminated the survey online. It is important to remember that there are bound to be biases:

1. **Digital divide:** The survey may not have reached those who conduct science communication primarily

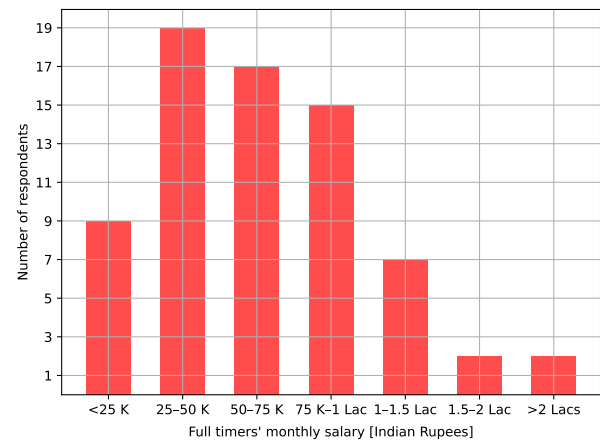


FIGURE 2. Histogram depicting the per-month salaries of 71 survey respondents working full-time in a single organisation at the time of the survey. Half the respondents earn between 25 and 75 thousand ₹ per month, while 12.7% earn below 25 thousand ₹. Close to 40% of full-time salaried individuals in this field of work are paid less than the minimum taxable salary, which is 50 thousand ₹ per month.

via offline channels, or are not active on social media channels. We have potentially left out crucial sections of the workforce who might be making significant groundwork in communicating science. Similar attempts in the future should make efforts to close this gap.

2. **Lack of professionalisation:** While we recognise the value of the labour put into SciComm, some may consider it voluntary service only. The lack of recognition of the labour in communicating science may have led some SciCommers not to have not taken the survey. In the future, we should also prioritise the professionalisation of the field.
3. **Networking bias:** The people who this survey reached are presumably related, through primary or extended networks, to the facilitators of this survey. Since SciComm in India is a field of relative newcomers (as the survey indicates), if experienced individuals did not take the survey, our conclusions may not sufficiently represent the true picture. These limitations are universal and binding.
4. **Language of the survey:** English was chosen as the language for the survey in the hope that it will be the most widely understood and thus will garner most responses. However, the possibility that the survey did not reach SciComm specialists working in any other language cannot be ruled out. Particularly, those who have studied science in any Indian language might not have been able to respond to the survey.
5. **Possible grey areas:** One of the respondents reported to be a full-time medical writer. The scope of medical writing is quite different from SciComm. However, the same respondent also reported freelancing regularly. Given the complicated nature of the work they are involved in, and since only one such respondent was found in our data, we did not exclude them from our analysis. Similarly, a small number of our responses included work which may not typically be considered under the SciComm umbrella, for example, writing annual reports and curriculum writing. We have included these responses in our analyses for the same reason.

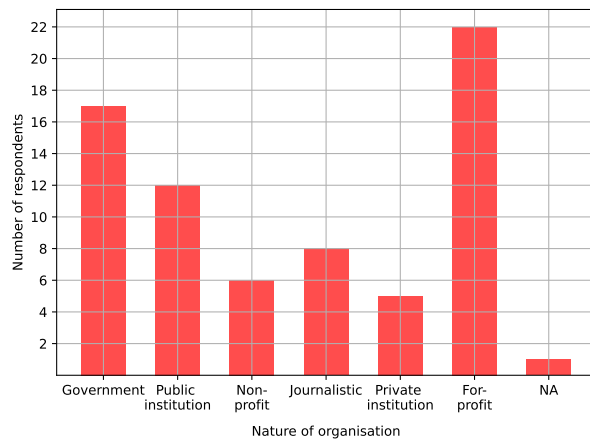


FIGURE 3. Histogram of the nature of organisations of 71 respondents who work full-time in a single organisation. This question was designed to answer where the funding in full-time science communication jobs come from. We realise that journalistic organisations may also be for-profit. Moreover, governmental institutions are primarily public funded, although private funding may help them communicate science.

3. Survey, data, and code

We released the survey through a form that collected the data into a spreadsheet. The data generated through this survey, redacted of personal information, is now openly accessible via an open spreadsheet, hyperlinked [here](#).

As with all work relying on surveys, we assume that all the data input by the respondents are correct to the best of their knowledge. Our results are based on this reasonable assumption.

For the freelancers' data, see Section 4.2, we extracted the data manually into a different sheet, hyperlinked [here](#).

We are also releasing another form specifically for freelancers, hyperlinked [here](#). This form will continue to crowd-source more data about freelancer remuneration and remain live indefinitely. We have ensured that the responses to the form will be automatically collected in the freelancers' information spreadsheet.

The PYTHON codes used to analyse the data, extensively commented to enable understanding, can be found at the GITHUB repository hyperlinked [here](#), which is open-access.

4. Results

The total number of respondents was 123. This sample size is not enough to draw statistical conclusions and help us bring out nuanced viewpoints. However, some of the questions do render straightforward, statistical conclusions, unless any of the biases discussed in Section 2 affect the data significantly. We caution the reader not to extrapolate our inferences out of context. Our summaries are informed by a careful look at the answers to the questions.

We found that more than 90% of the respondents (114 in number) hold at least one postgraduate degree, including more than 34% (42) respondents having completed a PhD degree. Moreover, about a quarter (34) hold a degree in SciComm as well. These numbers clearly demonstrate a high degree of formal education in the SciComm workforce.

Less than 20 individuals, 13.8% of the pool, have more than 8 years of experience in SciComm (see Figure 1). The number of professionals with moderate experience (5 to 8 years) was 15 (12.2%). While 39.8% (49) of the respondents have between 2 to 5 years of experience in SciComm, 34.1% (42)

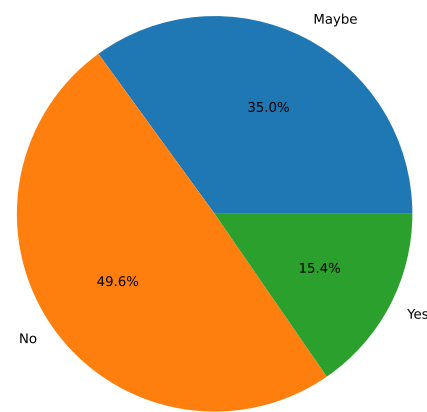


FIGURE 4. Pie-chart depicting the perception of 123 SciComms of their current remuneration, noting answers to the question: "Is your current salary commensurate with your educational qualifications/ work experience/ expertise in the field?" The answers are telling: there is a general dissatisfaction in the amount of compensation people are offered for their labour.

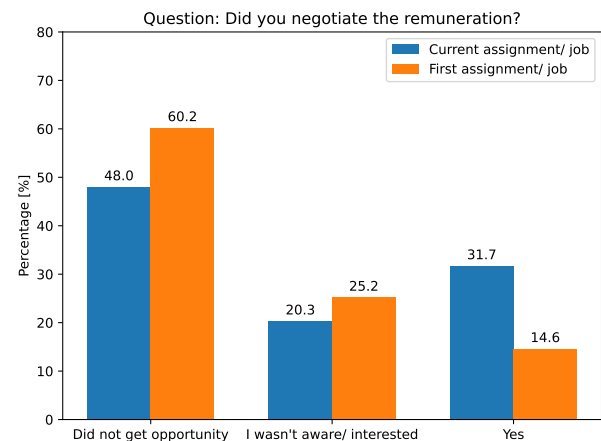


FIGURE 5. Comparison of how responses on negotiation opportunities: before and after. The answers are to the following questions: "For your latest role in science communication and public engagement, did you negotiate your salary with the organisation/institution?" indicating the present scenario and "For your first role in science communication and public engagement, did you negotiate your salary with the organisation/institution?" indicating the past scenario. The scenario reveals that SciComms are increasingly realising the need to negotiate over their career trajectory.

are still new to the field (less than 2 years). The average work experience across the group is less than 5 years, and the number of highly-experienced professionals in this field is small. Hiring bodies should be cognisant of this reality while asking for more than 5 years of experience in the field for entry-level SciComm jobs.

Among the respondents, 57.8% (71) are full-time professionals on a payroll of a single organisation. Within this group, 12.7% (9) are paid less than 25 thousand ₹ per month, less than half the minimum taxable income, while another 26.8% (19) are paid between 25 and 50 thousand ₹ per month (see Figure 2). In total, close to 40% of full-time salaried individuals in this field of work are paid less than the minimum taxable salary. Among the 71 full-timers, 23.9% (17) of professionals are paid less than 75 thousand ₹ monthly. In total, the number of individuals working in single full-time roles but paid less than 75 thousand ₹ per month encompasses 63.3% of individuals working in a full-time role in a single organisation.

These numbers do represent a general picture of inadequate compensation. Read with the lack of transparency in job de-

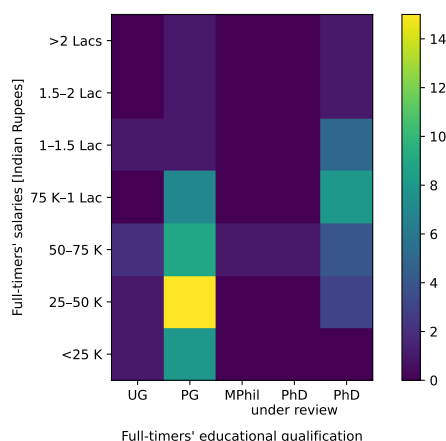


FIGURE 6. Heat-map of the 71 full-timers' salaries versus their educational qualification. The colours in the plot show the number of instances the two axes intersect. A (positive or negative) correlation would mean that there are more respondents along the diagonal elements, which would consequently be greener. However, that is not the case, as the responses are more along specific vertical lines (PG and PhD) of the plot.

scriptions from the hiring organisations, the numbers depict a trend of subtle exploitation of SciComms' labour.

To find out more about the employers, we also collected data on the nature of the hiring organisation in the survey. We found that amongst the 71 individuals who work in full-time organisations, 29 (40.8%) employers are from the government sector or publicly funded educational or academic institutions (see Figure 3). Amongst the rest, the majority were employed either by privately funded educational institutions or by for-profit companies.

We felt it pertinent to ask respondents about their satisfaction level with regard to compensation for their labour. The survey reveals that close to 50% (61) of the 123 respondents feel inadequately paid for their work, while only 15.4% (19) report being sufficiently compensated, see Figure 4.

The survey also collected information about the negotiation habits of SciComms. Amongst the 123 individuals who took the survey, 48.0% of individuals (59) report not negotiating the salaries or reimbursements offered to them for their latest work (see Figure 5). Only 31.7% (39) report negotiating.

The data for both full-time salaried individuals (Figure 2) and freelancers (Figure 8, see more in Section 4.2) indicate that the distribution of remuneration is not uniform, but rather, skewed towards lower remunerations. The observations of most respondents feeling inadequately compensated for their labour, and the data on negotiating the remunerations, may possibly indicate that active negotiation may possibly close the pay-gap and lead to a uniform distribution centred around the median. Establishing a direct causal relationship, however, was beyond the scope of our present work.

The state of affairs has improved over the years, however. Amongst the same participants, 60.2% (74) did not get an opportunity to negotiate in their first assignment or job, compared to 48.0% for their present assignment (see Figure 5). Moreover, only 14.6% (18) individuals negotiated the remuneration for their first assignment, compared to 31.7% individuals who negotiated for their current assignment. The scenario suggests that SciComms are increasingly realising the need to negotiate over their career trajectory.

Gendered norms play a role in amplifying the differences. The data shows that less than 15% (18) of the respondents are

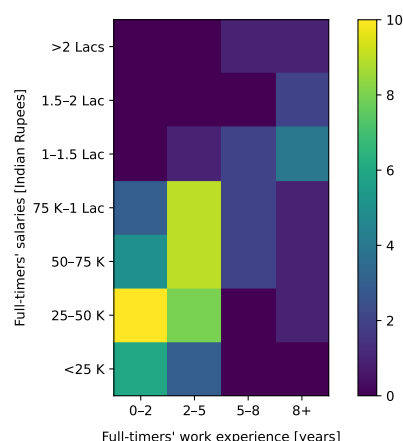


FIGURE 7. Heat-map of the 71 full-timers' salaries versus their science communication work experience, in years. The colours in the plot show the number of instances the two axes intersect. A (positive or negative) correlation would mean that there are more respondents along the diagonal elements, which would consequently be greener. However, that is not the case, as the responses are more in the lower end of both experience and salaries. It is possible that with finer binning in future surveys collecting the same data, a correlation emerges within the lesser paid and lesser experienced set of respondents.

cisgender men. This statistic suggests that in India, science communication is not dominated by cisgender men. Read with the worrying trends of meagre pay and labour exploitation, the gender data implies that people from gender minorities continue to face the brunt of an unfair system. Bruce V. Lewenstein refers to this phenomenon as the 'ghetto'-isation of women's over-representation in science communication [2]. SciComm seems similar to other fields (like psychology) dominated by women. Seen as a 'soft field' that makes it easier for women and gendered minorities to enter and survive in, the outcome ends up favouring cisgender men. It also amplifies the gendered views of labour in India, and the discrimination is subtle and statistical if not explicit and individualistic.

4.1 Correlation of salary with education and experience

In a formal work structure, one that advocates for 'salary commensurate with experience', we tested whether the 71 full-time science communicators' salaries are indeed commensurate with either educational qualification of the respondents or their experience (in years).

We plotted the full-timers' salaries according to the bins we had chosen while designing the survey, against the educational qualification bins (including 'Other' responses with specifications), in Figure 6. The colours in the plot note the number of instances the two scenarios take place, according to the bar given on the side. If the salary scaled with experience, the diagonal elements would be more densely populated, which is not observed.

Similarly, the full-timers' salaries against their work experience according to the prescribed bins are plotted in Figure 7. Here too, we do not find any correlation.

Since the full-time salaries do not scale either with educational qualification or with work experience, we conclude that the work structure is still not formalised. This is all the more reason for the job description to clearly mention salaries and responsibilities.

4.2 State of freelance SciComms

Our survey indicates that a significant number of India's science communicators work on a freelance basis (some carry

out freelance work while doing a full-time job). This sector is highly unregulated, understudied, and thereby it is common for freelancers to receive poor, erratic, and delayed payments. It was important to the authors that this survey attends to the needs of this subset as well. However, we knew that chasing metrics would be futile at this stage because there is no standardisation whatsoever.

Unlike salaried employees who get paid at regular intervals, freelancers receive payments sporadically, and there is no standard style of payment followed. This makes it difficult for freelancers to estimate what their average monthly pay comes up to. For example, clients may pay the SciCommer per word (of the final published article), per illustration, or per video produced. Alternatively, they may pay a lump sum for an entire project, which may constitute an article, a set of blogposts, a book, a month of social media posts, etc.

Since we were unsure of the most useful way to ask for details from the freelance contributors of this survey, we decided to keep this section of the survey subjective. We asked the contributors to share information about payments of up to 5 freelance gigs they have taken up since 2020. We included the “since 2020” part to ensure that we were comparing contemporary rates.

We aimed to generate a body of responses that would be useful to share with the broader community of freelance science communicators who are confused about how much to expect or demand from a client for a specific project, or eager to gauge how well the amount they are being offered compares with how much others have been paid for similar projects.

We used the data available from the entries to reasonably segregate the entries into Indian versus foreign clients. This was done because we realised it would be useful to get an idea of the gap in remuneration from these two groups of clients. Such information can enable freelance SciCommers to make better choices as they strive to make SciComm a financially sustainable career for themselves.

With this aim, along with this report, we are releasing an open spreadsheet, hyperlinked [here](#). The received entries are categorised according to the rows in Table 1. This spreadsheet will remain open. This open, crowd-sourced database can be a helpful resource to enable the freelance SciCommers’ community to make more informed choices, and hopefully lead to a standardisation of pay in the foreseeable future.

In addition, we are releasing another form specifically for freelancers, hyperlinked [here](#), without any closing date. This form aims to substantiate the database of freelance work in the above spreadsheet (previous paragraph) so that anyone can anonymously add information about freelance SciComm gigs they have taken up or are taking up. We have ensured that the responses to the form will be automatically collected in the same open spreadsheet.

Despite the qualitative nature of the freelancer section of the survey we conducted, we were able to glean some statistics from the collected data. We could distinguish a total of 111 freelance projects, which we divided into the categories given in Table 1.

We received at least 5 entries where SciComm services were provided by freelancers for *no fee*. The respondents took up this work for reasons such as “understanding the ecosystem of SciComm and getting a solid start in the field,” “I was a masters’ student,” “it was a not-for-profit organisation,” “voluntary work,” and “they did not like the design even after multiple iterations and a very short deadline.” (These quotes were slightly paraphrased for clarity. Original entries

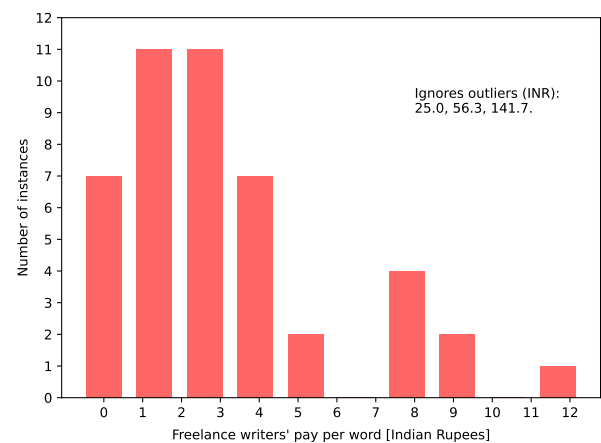


FIGURE 8. The distribution of per word rates paid to freelance SciComm writers is shown here. The rates offered by Indian clients ranged from 0.0₹ to 141.7₹, with a median of 3.5₹ per word. While 73.3% of Indian clients paid less than 5.0₹ per word, 91.1% of Indian clients paid less than 10.0₹ per word. The presence of outliers, not included in the distribution, points to a sharp difference between the usual pay and special cases. While the outlier that paid 25₹ per word was for a science-themed children’s storybook was based in India, the other two, 56.3₹ per word and 141.7₹ per word (assuming a conversion rate of 1\$ = 85₹) were paid by international clients.

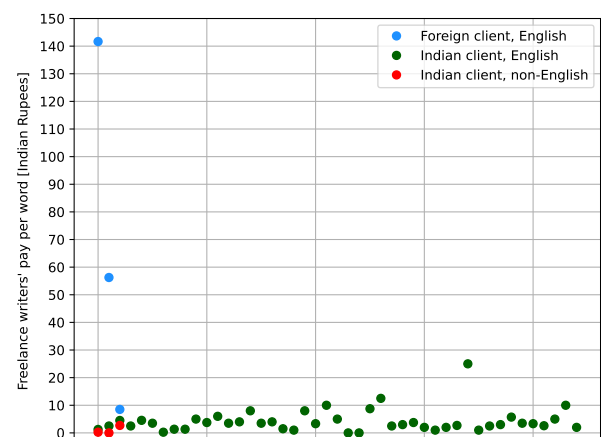


FIGURE 9. Scatter plot of freelance writers’ remunerations per word demonstrates the difference between Indian versus international clients. Amongst the Indian clients, the English projects offered better pay than non-English clients.

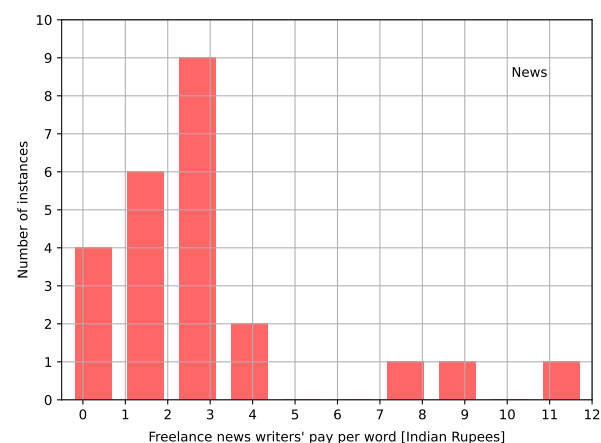


FIGURE 10. The distribution of per word rates for news/journalistic writing is shown here, depicting a higher number of poorly paid projects and a few outliers. The number of projects with this data available is 24.

Nature of work	Number of projects
Writing	67
Workshops	5
Translation	2
Video/Audio	6
Illustration/Art/Design	13
Editing/Managing	8
Other	10
Total	111

TABLE 1. Table showing the distribution of freelance projects amongst respondents. The ‘Writing’ entries include 5 foreign clients, the ‘Illustration/Art/Design’ entries include 3 foreign clients, and the ‘Other’ entries include outreach, maintaining public relations, science education, mentorship, transcription, and speaking.

can be viewed in the open spreadsheet, hyperlinked [here](#).)

Only the entries categorised as ‘Writing’ had a volume significant enough to draw some statistics from. Note that this included journalistic articles, blogposts, scripts, stories, columns, newsletters, annual reports, and work published on online/print and other types of platforms. We were able to derive 48 entries where per word rates could be derived. We also received data for lump sum payments for different types of work. In some cases, either of the information (per word or lump sum) was available; in other cases, both were available; while in a few, neither was available (find more details in Appendix A).

For calculating central tendencies, we used the median instead of the mean, because the latter is known to be prone to be affected by outliers which the former is not.

We noticed a stark difference for the compensation provided for projects commissioned by Indian clients versus those commissioned by foreign clients, although there were only 3 data points for the latter (see Figure 8). The median per word rate our respondents received from Indian clients is 3.3₹ per word. The median per word rate our respondents received from foreign clients is 56.3₹ per word, assuming a conversion rate of 1\$ = 85₹.

Within India, we segregated the projects into English and non-English projects. None of the non-English written projects paid over 5.0₹ per word. Figure 9 demonstrates the difference.

Additionally, 24 entries disclosed payments received for news articles or for news platforms. The payment per word ranged between 0.3₹ and 12.5₹, with a median of 3.0₹. We only included entries which were clearly or explicitly mentioned as journalistic writing assignments. The distribution is plotted in Figure 10.

The lump sum rates also point to the same reality, although the difference is not so stark (more details in Appendix A).

5. Conclusions

Science communication is yet to be adequately recognised as work, science communicators’ expertise is yet to be fully appreciated, and their labour compensated fairly. This situation is vastly pronounced in India. One of the steps to counter it is transparency. The survey we conducted is, we hope, a step in that direction.

Here, we have presented the results of the online survey. In acknowledgement of the belief that transparency is the key to

a future where people’s labour is compensated adequately, we have made the collected data public (without identifiable information of the respondents). In addition, we have released a subset of the data (pertaining only to the freelancers) in a form of a crowd-sourced database. We are also releasing a form that will allow freelancers to contribute information about payment for their projects. This information will get updated on the public database, which will serve as a handy resource for the SciComm freelance community as they make decisions on their future projects.

The results of our survey point to a grim reality. While most science communicators are paid poorly, some are underpaid to an alarming degree, including some not being paid at all. While the degree varies, science communicators, both full time and freelancers, are largely underpaid.

The study also points to outliers. Among both full-timers and freelancers, some individuals get paid much more than the average. The difference for the freelance projects can in some cases be explained by the difference in pay rates of Indian clients and international clients. Working for primarily foreign clients could be one way freelancers craft a sustainable SciComm career; needless to say, this is not a viable option for most. The tail end of the distribution for full-time SciCommers’ salaries remain to be explained, as no correlation with educational qualification or work experience was found. A possible reason for the difference could be negotiation skills. While the respondents generally report feeling inadequately compensated for their labour, not many even get the opportunity to negotiate their remuneration. However, we notice that over time, more professionals report having the opportunity to negotiate.

A note of caution

Please note that this survey is an attempt to showcase the status quo, and equip practitioners with the information needed to set healthier salary expectations. In the best case scenario, the results may be used by clients or employers who are genuinely interested in creating a better SciComm culture in India, thereby producing better SciComm. We strongly advise against the trends observed in this survey to be used as benchmarks, or as an excuse for clients or employers to underpay SciCommers. The survey’s results should not be used to underpay.

Future scope

We are aware that the data we collected via the survey may be open to further interpretation that may or may not back the conclusions we draw from it. We urge readers to conduct their own, independent analysis, or get in touch with us to explore possible questions.

We are also aware that the data we collected is limited, and a larger number of respondents would possibly rid it of biases that might have crept into our analysis. Some potential respondents expressed their desire to fill the survey after the last date, and we recognise that we might have missed out on key data points. Given the results of our study, we see scope to further improve the survey, reach more individuals (see Section 2), and answer questions that remain unanswered via our study.

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A. APPENDIX

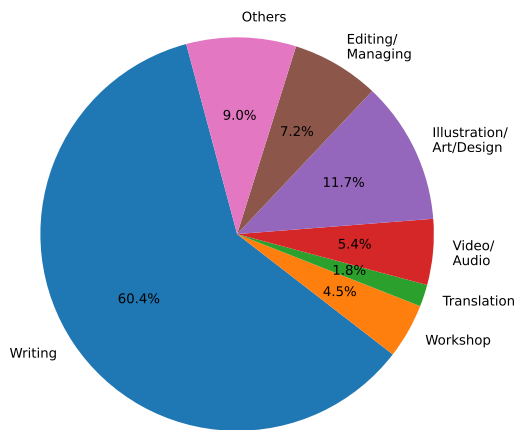


FIGURE A.1. The relative distribution of the nature of 111 freelance projects recorded in the survey.

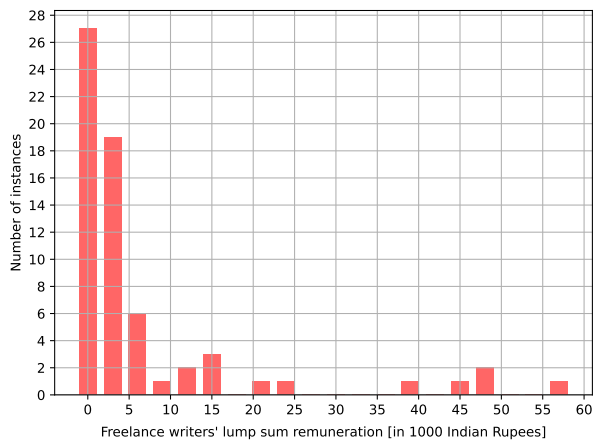


FIGURE A.2. The distribution of lump sum rates for freelance writers. The total number of projects with this data available is 65.

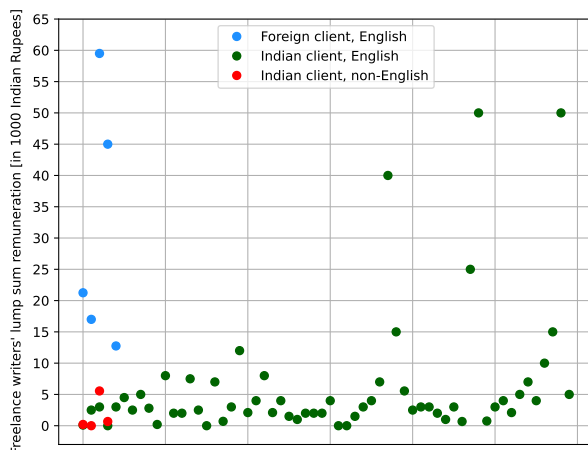


FIGURE A.3. Scatter plot of lump sum rates for freelance writers. The total number of projects with this data available is 65.

Here, we include additional plots for the freelance work as described in Section 4.2.

Figure A.1 shows the relative work distribution of 111 freelance projects given in Table 1.

Figure A.2 shows the distribution of the lump sum rate received by writers, while Figure A.3 shows the corresponding

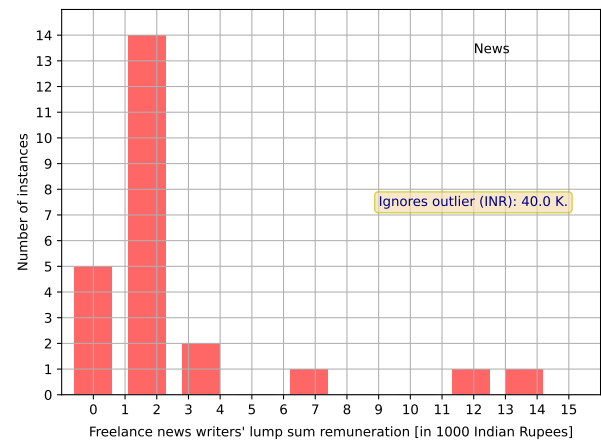


FIGURE A.4. The distribution of lump sum rates for freelance news writers. The total number of projects with this data available is 25.

scatter plot, both with 65 data points. The conversion rate used is $1\$ = 85\text{₹}$. The difference between the lump sum amounts paid for Indian and international projects is visible but not as pronounced as in the per word rates (see Figure 9).

Figure A.4 shows the distribution of lump sum payments for 25 freelance projects of journalistic nature, with the same conversion rate.