

The Sixth Annual World Congress of Science Producers

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Delegates from around the world shared their views on science television and movie production at the Sixth Annual World Congress of Science Producers in Boston on 20-24 November 1998. Participants in the congress (an annual event) were science-documentary producers, producers of science television series, and makers of large-format (IMAX) movies. In addition to many Americans, there were people from Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Switzerland, Australia, and China.

Stephen Jay Gould, well-known natural-history writer and Harvard evolutionary biologist, delivered the keynote address. Gould's theme was science literacy. He said, "most people are born with a love of science. This love has to be beaten out of us to lead us to hate and fear science." He named as the culprit what he called the Franciscan idea of science: "If we emphasize and say that science is special and better [than other human endeavors], we make the very separation that we are trying to avoid." Rather, he advocated a so-called Galilean approach. "This humanizing approach emphasizes that science is not a thing apart", Gould said. "Human creative thought is human creative thought, whether it's art and humanities or science." To communicate the humanity of science, Gould urged science broadcasters to show the role of error in the scientific enterprise, the context of science, and its linkages with other fields.

The congress consisted of many informative sessions. In the "Science and the Media" session, Rick Chappell of Vanderbilt University First Amendment Center

said that his organization found "a cultural change within the scientific community": 81% of scientists surveyed said that they not only would take time to communicate to the public, but would take time to be trained to communicate. The First Amendment Center also advocates that scientists be required to write—for the public—a second peer-reviewed abstract for each of their journal papers, Chappell said. The center recently published the report *Worlds Apart: How the*

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Distance Between Science and Journalism Threatens America's Future.

Other sessions, such as "Ideas as Currency" and "From Ideas to Deals", showed that the relationship between producers of network science series and independent producers (who want to make episodes for the series) is similar to that between print editors and authors. The panel of network series producers, including NOVA's Executive Producer Paula Apsell, stressed that independent producers should prove that they are familiar with a show's needs and are trying to meet them. The question of rights—Who owns a show, the network or the company that made it?—was also discussed.

A session called "Visualizing Science" featured Felice Frankel of MIT's Edgerton Center. Frankel said that interesting scientific images translate into grant money for scientists because magazine editors notice

the images and then interview the scientists. Frankel's photographs of MIT research have appeared on the covers of *Science*, *Nature*, and *Science News*. Citing examples in materials science, chemistry, and physics, she said that creative use of imagery can help make research better known.

The international nature of science communication was evident throughout the congress. In a session called "Focus on Versioning", a French delegate explained that "every culture has its own way of telling a story." He went on to show several versions of a short film that he made to reveal the nature of plastic. The film began with a blue plastic fish and then zoomed in ever closer until the molecular structure of plastic was evident. A voiceover explained the pictures. Later versions of the film, to be shown in different countries, were slightly changed to suit specific audiences. Spanish producers added a congenial host, standing in a comfortable living-room setting, to explain the science.

Several delegates discussed the funding situation in different countries. The complicated nature of Canadian law means that producers often work with 5 or more government agencies to fund a single production, one delegate said. Another explained that in Australia the government-run broadcasting company is just beginning to accept some independently made productions.

A delegate from China warned producers from the West to get in touch with their Chinese production colleagues before submitting Chinese versions of their programs to the government censors. Chinese producers can help western producers create versions that will not be rejected, he said.

In honor of its 25th season on the air, the WGBH-Boston series NOVA hosted the congress. The Discovery Channel, the Public Broadcasting System, and the National Science Foundation also provided support. ■