

# 1999 NASW Workshops: Some Highlights

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*CBE Views*

The National Association of Science Writers (NASW) focuses mainly on communication of science to the public, rather than scholarly scientific communication, the central concern of CBE. However, the interests of the 2 groups sometimes overlap, especially at the intersection of popular and scholarly scientific communication.

The most recent NASW workshops, held 20-21 January in Anaheim, California, touched repeatedly on that intersection. Subjects of discussion included embargoes for news reporting on journal articles, availability of newsworthy findings in journals other than the few that often receive media attention, and coverage of the dismissal by the American Medical Association (AMA) of Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) editor George D Lundberg. As in past years, the NASW workshops immediately preceded the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) annual meeting, which many science journalists cover.

## “Embargoed Science, Embattled System”

The plenary session, “Hold for Release: Embargoed Science, Embattled System”, addressed the past, present, and future of news embargoes in science.

David Perlman, science editor with the San Francisco Chronicle, and Cristine Russell, special health correspondent with the Washington Post, reflected on their experience covering the “Asilomar conference”. Scientists held this conference in 1975 to discuss risks in the emerging field of genetic engineering and to develop guidelines for research. A limited number of journalists were allowed to attend the conference on the condition that they not publish anything until after it ended.

Perlman and Russell said the embargo on publication made sense in that case. It apparently allowed freer discussion among scientists and deeper understanding by

journalists. In addition to excellent stories, Russell said, legacies of the conference have included greater understanding of the media by the scientists, development of long-term sources by the journalists, and many insights into the process of dealing with difficult scientific issues.

Journalists and journal representatives then discussed the embargo system whereby some journals give reporters access to articles before publication on the condition that they not release reports before a specified time. Recounting instances in which ~~embargoes were broken, Robert Lee Hotz,~~

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science reporter with the Los Angeles Times, asked why journals do not enforce their embargoes more rigorously. “When journals don't enforce their embargoes”, he said, “they're not living up to their end of the bargain.” He speculated that journals hesitated to discipline violators for fear of losing free publicity.

Doug Levy, science reporter with USA Today, agreed with Hotz's conclusions. After emphasizing that the embargo system should aim to encourage high-quality reporting, he noted that with the advent of the Internet information has become harder to control. He also observed that embargoes have been broken by financial analysts, who are not bound by the same rules as science writers.

Representatives of journals then spoke. Monica Bradford, managing editor of Science, noted difficulties with financial reporters, who work outside this embargo system. She also mentioned that Science might begin posting articles on the World Wide Web as soon as they are ready for publication. In that case, the embargo would shift to the time of posting.

The Proceedings of the National Acad-

emy of Sciences is considering similar steps, said Susan Turner-Lowe, of the National Academy of Sciences. She asked what it means to be published nowadays.

David I Lewin of the Journal of the National Cancer Institute raised the issue of who should receive embargoed material. He said that the journal had refused requests from trade associations and nutritional-supplement makers. He also stated that covering non-peer-reviewed research risked presenting “the wrong story”. Peer review is not passive, he explained; it can lead to new experiments or statistical reanalysis, and thus conclusions can change.

The embargo system can benefit journals, journalists, scientists, and the public, said Laura Garwin, North America editor of Nature. She said that when a reporter independently uncovers a story before the embargo date, the embargo is lifted early for all.

Materials distributed at the session included a set of feature articles and an accompanying editorial that Science recently published on embargoes (1998;282:860-9, 877).

## Other Workshops

Concurrent workshops in 3 tracks—journalism, freelance, and public information—followed the plenary session. In “What Makes a Successful Public Information Office? A User's View”, print and broadcast journalists presented dos and don'ts. They recommended that news releases on research in less widely available journals be accompanied by copies of the papers.

“Lies, Damned Lies and Statistics!”, led by freelance science writer John Dudley Miller, focused on critical reading of journal articles. Even studies in prestigious peer-reviewed journals can contain statistical errors that call the researchers' conclusions into question, Miller noted. Illustrating his points with examples of faulty research design and analysis, Miller, who has a PhD in psychology, showed fellow journalists how they can evaluate studies better.

The workshop “Getting It Right” addressed issues of accuracy. One speaker,

Jon Franklin of the Raleigh News & Observer, said the worst errors often involve not misstatement of facts but poor choice of questions or topics. Franklin, who won the first Pulitzer Prize in feature writing for his medical narrative “Mrs. Kelly’s Monster”, said a narrative approach can sometimes produce stories that are more powerful and accurate than those in usual journalistic formats. Joel Greenberg of the Los Angeles Times indicated that publishing a story summarizing what is known on a topic, rather than separate stories on successive findings, can convey a more accurate picture.

“Big Stories, Ambitious Projects” began with Boyce Rensberger, who directs the Knight Science Journalism Fellowships program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Rensberger described how he developed the “Horizon” section while at the Washington Post. Scott LaFee of the San Diego Union-Tribune discussed the 12-part series—one installment per month—that he wrote on evolution. And Robert Logan, professor of journalism at the University of Missouri-Columbia, offered guidance on beginning a long story effectively and following through.

In the catch-all session “Late-Breaking News Analysis”, Glenda Chui of the San Jose Mercury News identified as promising sources of science news nearly 20 journals that the Institute for Scientific Information has shown to be influential but that receive relatively little media coverage. Alexandra Witze of the Dallas Morning News discussed avoiding pack journalism. Among her tips: Browse through the section of the library that contains newly arrived issues of journals. And Paul Raeburn of Business Week, discussed coverage of some truly late-breaking news: AMA’s dismissal several days earlier of JAMA editor George D Lundberg. Raeburn said that the story was

really about politics and should be covered accordingly rather than from a narrow scientific focus.

“Step-by-Step Through the Multimedia Maze: A Hands-on How-to for Multimedia” included ideas for engaging readers through this medium, which is poorly suited to linear story-telling. Means of engaging readers include polls, audio and video clips, and links to other information sources. Another session, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Lab: Using Humor in Writing

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About Science”, included the observation that scientists working in esoteric fields often use engagingly eccentric metaphors to describe their work.

Among other offerings were “Making Your Office Work” (a workshop for freelancers), “#3@&!@\*##! . . . or Miss Manners’ Guide to Dealing with Difficult Researchers”, “Public Information Offices Go Electronic: How to Take Advantage of the New Medium”, and “Writing a Science Book: Recent Authors Tell How and Why They Did It”.

In keeping with the Southern California venue, NASW also held a half-day session, “From Science to Screen”, that included discussion of film clips. The session began with the screening of student films that won awards through an Alfred P Sloan Foundation program to promote more realistic depiction of scientists. Speakers included Neal Baer, supervising producer and writer of ER, and Lynn Spigel, chair of the critical studies division at the University of South-

ern California, who showed and analyzed clips on the theme of reproducing life.

### **AAAS Science Journalism Awards**

The 1998 AAAS Science Journalism Awards were presented on 23 January at the NASW annual dinner. The winners are

- Newspapers over 100 000 Circulation: John McQuaid, Mark Schleifstein, Lynne Jensen, Andrew Boyd, and Scott Threlkeld, The Times-Picayune (New Orleans), for “Home Wreckers”, a series on the Formosan termite.
- Newspapers under 100 000 Circulation: Robyn Suriano and Todd Halvorson, Florida Today, for “Cassini: Debating the Risks”.
- Magazines: Mark Schoofs, Village Voice, for “How Genetics is Changing Our Lives”.
- Television: Julia Cort, WGBH-TV, and Robert Gardner, Gardner Films, for “Warnings from the Ice”.
- Radio: David Baron, National Public Radio, for “Montserrat Volcano Science”.

The Whitaker Foundation sponsors the awards.

### **For Further Information**

Fuller descriptions of the AAAS-award winning entries have been posted at [www.aaas.org/communications/awards.htm](http://www.aaas.org/communications/awards.htm). And lists of NASW workshops from this year and previous years are available at [www.nasw.org](http://www.nasw.org). Information on ordering tapes of the workshops can be obtained from the NASW Web site or from Diane McGurgan, executive director, NASW, PO Box 294, Greenlawn NY 11740; telephone 516-757-5664; fax 516-757-0069; e-mail [diane@nasw.org](mailto:diane@nasw.org).

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