

Journals as Science News Source: Workshop Report

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Most of the science news in US newspapers comes from only five sources, of which four are journals. Curt Suplee*, science editor of the *Washington Post*, noted this point at the American Chemical Society annual Science Reporters Workshop held 13-15 October 2000 in Washington, DC. At this workshop for young science writers, he also offered advice on identifying newsworthy journal articles and reporting effectively on research presented in them.

Suplee said that 80% of science news in US newspapers comes from the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Science*, *Nature*, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

He noted that another 11% of the news comes from the *British Medical Journal*, *The Lancet*, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, and reports from the National Institutes of Health and nongovernment organizations. "We all have to swim in this constricted pool", Suplee said. He urged the roomful of young science journalists not to limit themselves to those sources; but unfortunately, he said, that is how science journalism works every day in

the United States.

Science journalists must sift through a large amount of scientific terminology to pick out the news. That difficult task is made easier by the dominating journals, which provide explanations of the most noteworthy articles in plain English. They also provide telephone and fax numbers and e-mail addresses of the public-information officers at the scientists' institutions. In addition, those journals release the information a week in advance, on an embargoed basis, so journalists have time to research the story before the journals reach the public. "The ease of operation is the overwhelming reason these journals provide the bulk of the news", Suplee said.

Suplee said that the first thing reporters should look for in one of the journals is the accompanying editorials. He also pointed the audience to *Nature's* "In This Issue" department, which highlights the papers that the editors think are the most interesting, and mentioned *Nature's* "News and Views" department, which contains commentaries on selected articles; a similar department, called "Perspectives", can be found in *Science*.

So just what is news? Suplee joked that the order of importance in the responsible daily press is not much different from that in the tabloids. "We like panic, and we like death." He urged the audience not

to overlook the news value of intriguing topics, such as dinosaurs and black holes. "Don't think this is merely trivial; this stuff makes the news", he said. He noted that if anything is certain to get into the news, it is findings of an early treatment for a terminal disease, such as AIDS. Weird topics also tend to get coverage, Suplee said. For example, "if you write anything about the intelligence of a slime mold, you will get it into the paper."

To help with the selection process, Suplee advised the young journalists to take a look at Eurekalert! (www.eurekalert.org), a site developed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science to be a "one-stop-shopping" site for research-related press releases. He encouraged supplementing journal articles with press releases because a release can often provide additional insight into the original article.

To improve their eye for the news, Suplee advised the young journalists to see which articles actually were covered. He says it takes practice, but "it's surprising how easy it is to catch on." 

*When *Science Editor* went to print, Curt Suplee had taken a new position as director of the Office of Legislative and Public Affairs at the National Science Foundation.

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