

# Highlights of the AAAS Annual Meeting

### Linda Wang

The 2001 annual meeting and exposition of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), held 15-20 February in San Francisco, included a number of sessions related to science editing and other fields of science communication.

At the session “Who Should Write the Story of Science?”, a panel of science writers and others shared their thoughts on the roles of various professions in explaining science to a general audience. Science writers were once general-assignment reporters who were assigned to cover science, said Sharon Dunwoody, professor of journalism at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. But now, she noted, science writers are increasingly scientists turned communicators.

Scientists are also important in the process, said Don Johansson, author and paleo-anthropologist. The scientists who make the most effort to explain their work to a wide audience are the ones most likely to be encouraged by the scientific community and funded, he said. “Scientists who make the decision to remain quiet”, he said, “do so at their own peril.” To improve communication, Johansson suggested that journals ask authors to include with their articles lay summaries explaining the importance and implications of their work. He said they should also put their findings in the context of related work.

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At the session “What Makes a Science Book Become a Best Seller?”, several best-selling authors and publishers offered advice to budding authors. Amanda Cook, senior editor at Perseus Books in Cambridge, Massachusetts, admitted that there is no recipe for a best-seller. “The horrible, heartbreaking truth is that most books aren’t best-sellers”, she said. “In fact, most books are outright failures.”

*Behind every best-selling science book lurks a rollicking good story.*

The good news is that more publishers are picking science books in response to the growing recognition that science has an enormous impact on our lives, Cook said. The first step in writing a best-seller is to be original, she said; don’t try to copy a book that is already a best-seller. Second, she said, be passionate about your topic. Passion will help authors get through the years it takes to write a book. But most important, she said, tell a good story, because “behind every best-selling science book lurks a rollicking good story.”

Covering science for various media was the topic of the session “Science and the News Media”. Glenda Chui, of the *San Jose Mercury News*, said that of the 70 000 to 80 000 scientific and technical journals available, four carry more than one-third of the research covered in the popular press: the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Science*, and *Nature*. There’s a

flood of information that reporters don’t even see, she conceded.

Charles Petit, of *U.S. News & World Report*, noted three trends in science journalism. First, he said, the World Wide Web is playing an ever more important role. Second, the field is starting to be dominated by women. And third, topics that science journalists cover are increasingly in life and behavioral sciences. That shift in topics tends to make the nature of science writing more serious, he said. Life, death, and disease are more serious than nanotubes, he observed.

At the roundtable discussion session “Scientific Integrity: What To Do About Conflicts of Interest?”, a panel of experts explored the relationship between science and industry. The growth of the biotechnology industry has led to more situations that could involve a financial incentive, said Wendy Baldwin, deputy director for extramural research at the National Institutes of Health. One way to manage conflicts of interest has been disclosure, said Kenneth J Rothman, professor of epidemiology at Boston University School of Public Health and founding editor of the *Journal of Epidemiology*. In a financial disclosure statement, journals inform readers about any involvement that researchers have with a company. But disclosures must be used properly, he said, because they can affect how readers view reported findings.

For further information on the 2001 AAAS annual meeting, see [www.aaas.org/meetings](http://www.aaas.org/meetings). Audiotapes of sessions can be ordered from AVEN, telephone 206-440-7989 or 800-810-8273, [www.aven.com](http://www.aven.com). 