

NASW Workshops Address Extent, Settings, Techniques of Science Coverage

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Should science be getting more coverage in the news media? If so, who or what is at fault for insufficient reporting? Editors who are uncomfortable with science stories? Advertisers who feel that science-section readers are an inaccessible market? Readers' lack of interest? How can science journalists find new stories and liven up their writing?

Science writers and editors addressed those issues and more at the National Association of Science Writers (NASW) workshops held in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on 14 February 2002.

In the plenary session, "Can Science Compete With Other News?", editors from *The Dallas Morning News*, *USA Today*, and *The Boston Globe* presented their views on how science news fares in the competition for media attention.

Karen Jurgenson, editor-in-chief of *USA Today*, commented that *USA Today* readership surveys have found high interest in science news. She said her paper devotes substantial space to science and medical news and is "running all the science stories we can". Jurgenson emphasized that science stories should be played as the news value dictates, with daily stories and news briefs, not weekly sections.

Matt Storrin, former science-section editor at *The Boston Globe* said the amount of science coverage in newspapers is generally pretty good and agreed that readers are hungry for this type of story. If science stories don't compete well, Storrin said, it is because editors are unfamiliar with or uncomfortable with science. Science stories often lack tension and other traditional elements of a good news story, and editors are not sure that they can sort the good stories from the

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bad in a field they know little about.

Science may be in the news, but the amounts of space and time devoted to nonmedical science news are not impressive compared with other "less important" news categories, such as sports, said Science Editor Tom Siegfried, of *The Dallas Morning News*.

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is not good journalism. Newspapers should dedicate more resources to high-quality coverage of important scientific issues.

While recognizing the economic reality of advertisers who would rather place ads in travel or home-and-garden sections than in science sections, Siegfried laid the ultimate blame on editors. Editors could, in Siegfried's opinion, make a more concerted effort to get money from science-oriented advertisers to fund larger, better science sections that would be popular with readers. "Many readers are sick of crime, sports, and politics. What science news we do is great, but it is

not enough. What we cover is only a tiny fraction of what is important."

Jurgenson responded that papers like *USA Today* are doing very well at giving readers the level of information that they want. If readers want more detailed science coverage, they can and will turn to more specialized publications.

In the session "Writing from the Field", panelists presented the joys and trials of reporting science from remote and exotic outdoor research sites. Mark Cherrington, freelance writer and former editor of *Earthwatch* magazine, noted that field reporting is important for the same reasons as field science—it doesn't let the researcher isolate the problem from its environment.

Peter Tyson, online producer for NOVA, described his experiences in reporting on location in Madagascar and described such difficulties as transportation, illness, and cultural differences. He encouraged prospective field reporters to "go with the flow" and grab every opportunity.

"Fiction Writing Techniques for Non-fiction" offered writers suggestions on how to make their work more engaging and readable. Gareth Cook, reporter for *The Boston Globe*, suggested that writers try to use at least one literary technique—such as character, theme, and sensory images—in each story. "There is no bag of tricks", said Ellen Ruppell Shell, codirector of Boston University's Knight Center for Science and Medical Journalism. "This type of writing gets its power from humans and their motivations." Fiction author Simon Mawer pointed out that many science journalists are already using fiction techniques, for we can view science only through the people who do it.

Other workshops included "Multimedia Science Reporting", "The Successful Science Book", "Investigative and Interpretive Science Reporting", and "Public Broadcasting Science TV". The full program for the workshops has been posted at nasw.org. 