by Judith McIntosh White

Harvard's Nieman Reports *Looks at Science Journalism*

As regular Views Afield columnist Lynn Dirk has observed, "Articles on the portrayal of science in the popular media are numerous and varied." Now *Nieman Reports*, published by The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University, has dedicated half its fall 2002 issue to science journalism. The issue, available at *www.Nieman.Harvard.edu*, includes 18 articles on science journalism spanning 40-plus pages. Among articles that may especially interest science editors are the following.

Hotz RL. The difficulty of finding impartial sources in science. Nieman Rep 2002;56(3):6-7.
Although science writers are increasingly better educated about their subjects and about science journalism itself, it has become harder and harder for them to find sources with unbiased viewpoints on scientific issues. Furthermore, the media marketplace often places science writers in the ranks of either the freelance or the overworked, making them more dependent on "cooperative" sources with an ax to grind or a stake to uphold and less able to undertake investigative science reporting.

Rensberger B. What every journalist should know about science and science journalism, and **Books every science writer should read. Nieman Rep 2002;56(3):11, 12.**
These pieces are sidebars to Rensberger's article "Reporting Science Means Looking for Cautionary Signals". The former sidebar includes the points that "some forms of evidence are worth more than others", that uncertainty is an integral part of science, and that principled professional autonomy is the prerogative not only of the scientist but also of the science writer. The latter sidebar lists 41 books that can serve as background reading for the serious science journalist. Suggestions range from Darwin's *Origin of Species* and Einstein's *Relativity* to Diamond's more recent *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.

Frankel F. Technology enables new scientific images to emerge. Nieman Rep 2002;56(3):29-31.
"Image-thinking writers and editors" have at their disposal new technologies with which images can be constructed to allow humans to see beyond their naked eyes—and beyond the limits of visual instrumentation. Such images allow "the creative process of telling scientific stories [to] become a collaboration among writers, editors *and* picture makers." (The article includes examples of scientific images by Frankel, who was keynote speaker at the 2002 CSE annual meeting.)

Starr D. Teaching journalism students to report on science. Nieman Rep 2002;56(3):36-8.
A key lesson for science writers, both students and seasoned journalists, is to present science stories in context. Doing this includes weighing evidence and linking the science it supports to economic, political, and other factors that help give the story meaning for readers. Editors should accept the complexities of science stories and recognize that the time-honored advice to "boil it down" often leads to omitting crucial details.

Thomas P. Meshing science, money and politics in a book about AIDS vaccines. Nieman Rep 2002;56(3):38-9.
Narrative is a powerful tool in telling science stories and helps to bring context and the human element into the picture.

Reed R, Walker G. Listening to scientists and journalists. Nieman Rep 2002;56(3):45-6.
Scientists, journalists, and science writers involved in focus groups conducted by Australian communication researchers share concern about accurately informing the public. However, their occupational cultures sometimes interfere with useful discussion. Public-relations personnel, particularly those at universities, may facilitate communication by giving journalists more explanatory help and by coaching scientists in how to talk effectively to the media. However, such PR practitioners must understand both science and journalism if they are to serve as effective links between the two. Stories could benefit from expanded journalistic research, better use of metaphors, and "creative 'layering' techniques with text, pictures, and graphics".

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