

The 2003 NASW Workshops: Way Beyond Google

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Science writers nationwide eased cramped fingers from computer keyboards. Editors laid down blue pencils. They departed for Denver for the National Association of Science Writers (NASW) annual workshops, held 13 February. The workshops followed afternoon field trips to scientific sites in the Denver area, and they immediately preceded the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting. (See preceding article.)

Giving writers and editors a chance to discuss issues facing the field of science writing and to hone their professional skills, the workshops at the 2003 meeting encompassed a wide variety of topics. The meeting began with the plenary session “Are We Missing the Real Climate Change Story?” Thereafter, smaller groups met for workshops divided into four “tracks”: Weather and Climate, Pro, Rookie, and Public Information Officer (PIO).

The Weather and Climate Track continued the theme of the plenary session, addressing media coverage and use of weather stories in three panel discussions: “Break Out of the Global Warming Trap: An Update from the Front Lines of Science, Policy & the Media”; “Weather and Climate Models: Their Strengths and Limitations”; and “Extreme Weather Stories: Storm Clouds and Silver Linings”. The Pro Track began with “Storytelling 101: Pulitzer Tale Telling”, during which a panel of Pulitzer Prize winners, including NASW President Deborah Blum, addressed aspects of narrative science writing, such as gathering information, determining a focus, and structuring the piece.

During the Pro Track session “Embargoed

for Release: Does It Help or Hurt?” panelists debated the embargo system in which some journals—including *Science*, *Nature*, and the *New England Journal of Medicine*—make information about research to be published in the journal available to journalists ahead of time but forbid publication of stories about that research until a specified date. Peter Wrobel, managing editor of *Nature*, defended embargoes, saying they increase the flow of information by maximizing the publicity both the journal and the specific piece of research receive. He said that embargoes also ensure that, at the time readers get the news, the research article is available so they can follow up on what they have read. In this way, he said, the embargo system limits the mistakes made in coverage.

Harvey Leifert, public-information manager for the American Geophysical Union, criticized several aspects of the “embargo machine” used by many major journals. He particularly attacked the practice of forbidding scientists from talking to journalists until just before the embargo is lifted. “I don’t believe any journal has the right to tell scientists how and when they can talk about their research”, Leifert said. Responding to a comment about “gag orders” during the question-and-answer period, he added that “holy hell would break loose” if the government forbade scientists to talk about federally funded research until the government granted permission.

Also in the Pro Track, writers and editors learned ways to improve the speed, accuracy, and value of their Web searches in “Beyond Google: New Strategies for Web Research”. “In common usage, ‘Google’ is now a verb in addition to a noun”, said Tom Roberts, deputy managing editor of National-Academies.org, emphasizing the frequent and widespread use of the Google

search engine. Panelists discussed a variety of tools that writers and editors in the sciences can use.

Alan M Schlein, author of *Find It Online: The Complete Guide to Online Research*, recommended using free search engines (like Google and Yahoo) to pin down keywords and phrases related to a topic and then using these keywords to search fee-based databases (like LexisNexis) and other resources.

Cary Schneider, news research manager at *The Los Angeles Times*, pointed out that most public libraries make many fee-based Internet resources available to their patrons at no charge—a useful tip for freelance writers and editors! Schlein also suggested using specialized search tools in addition to search engines and databases. Such tools include expert finders, e-mail groups, listservers, and subject-focused sites. Science-specific tools that he recommended included.

Other sessions in the Pro Track included “Writing Book Proposals that Sell” and “Intersection of Marketing, PR, and Science Writing: Selling or Telling?”

“Helping Scientists Talk to the Media” fell under both the Rookie and PIO Tracks. The session addressed the longstanding problem of bridging the gap between scientists and journalists. The focus lay heavily on how PIOs can prepare the scientists they work with to deal with the media. Other sessions included in multiple tracks were “Infoshop Collaboration Secrets: Increase Your Coverage Power” and “When Marketing Masquerades as News”.

The full program of 2003 workshops can be found at www.nasw.org. 

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