

## THE JOURNALISTIC

# The Future of the Embargo

### Panelists:

**Monica Bradford**  
Science  
Washington, DC

**Phil Fontanarosa**  
*Journal of the American Medical Association*  
Chicago, Illinois

**Harvey Leifert**  
American Geophysical Union  
Washington, DC

**Byron Spice**  
*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

### Moderator:

**Annette Flanagan**  
*Journal of the American Medical Association*  
Chicago, Illinois

### Reporter:

**Julia C Blixrud**  
Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC)  
Washington, DC

Do news embargoes ensure better science reporting? Or have the Internet and online publishing obviated embargoes? This session was a continuation of other CSE sessions designed to address issues of making science information available to the public. For purposes of this panel presentation, an embargo break was defined as a journalist's receiving information and intentionally putting it into the public domain before public release by the journal.

A variety of relationships exist between authors and journalists, authors and journals, and authors and public program offices regarding the prepublication release of

information. The panelists provided case studies of news embargo breaks and the resulting effect on those relationships, especially relationships with reporters. Editors at *Science* and the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* described their embargo policies. Handouts at the session included a December 2000 article from *JAMA* regarding its policy (2000;284:2929-31; available at [www.jama.com](http://www.jama.com)) and an October 2002 opinion piece in *Physics Today* by Harvey Leifert (available at [www.aip.org/web2/aiphome/pt/vol-55/iss-10/p48.html](http://www.aip.org/web2/aiphome/pt/vol-55/iss-10/p48.html)).

The session included a case study presented by each panelist and commentary from the rest of the panelists. Monica Bradford outlined a planetary-science story of June 2000 in which a version of the results was reported on a Web site 10 days before the day when the embargo was scheduled to be lifted. Phil Fontanarosa discussed the embargo breach that occurred on the evening before a scheduled media briefing to release the results of the Women's Health Initiative clinical trial in July 2002 and the confusion that resulted. As a consequence of the breach, *JAMA* removed the reporter and newspaper from its advance list. Leifert summarized the value of press briefings at scientific conferences and described the difficulty of scheduling briefings when authors are prevented by their journal agreements from presenting findings before articles are published. He also presented a case study of a paper that was to be presented and a press conference scheduled by the American Geophysical Union that was usurped by a press release from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration the day before.

Fontanarosa discussed several potential advantages of the embargo: It provides adequate time to prepare a story; fosters accurate, thoughtful, balanced reporting;

levels the playing field for reporters, especially for news organizations that do not have regular science reporters; coordinates the release of information; reduces concern about being "scooped"; avoids haphazard, sporadic reports of a given study; and, for medical journals, helps to ensure that physicians have received the relevant issue before news stories about the paper in question are released.

Byron Spice noted that embargoes differentiate science and medical writers from other newsroom staff; he, like others with his experience, could probably develop stories without embargoes. However, it is helpful to have the time to track down someone to provide intelligent comments, a local perspective, or more background information. Embargoes especially benefit smaller outlets, which do not have the prestige of larger news organizations and find it more difficult to reach primary scientists. He noted that embargoes encourage pack science—everyone reporting on the same topic—and can make reporters lazy because it is already known when a given journal article will appear.

Several issues arose during the discussion. In this day of rapid Internet postings, how is it possible to determine who breached an embargo? What are the consequences for the journalist or news outlet that breaks an embargo? What is fair to journalists who respect embargoes? How can a journal counteract misinformation if an embargo is broken and the resulting public story is inaccurate? If a story breaks early, when and how should the journal lift the embargo? Is reporting improved because of embargoes? Does the embargo system restrict scientific and academic freedom? In addition to the lively exchange among panelists, the audience actively engaged in discussion of this issue. 