

## The Social Responsibility of Journal Editors

*Moderator:*

**Faith McLellan**

*The Lancet*

New York, New York

*Speakers:*

**John Ward**

*Morbidity and Mortality Weekly*

Atlanta, Georgia

**Sarah Ramsey**

*The Lancet*

London, England

**Hemai Parthasarathy**

Public Library of Science

Washington, DC

*Reporter:*

**Liz Haberkorn**

American Society for Cell Biology

Bethesda, Maryland

Society is shaped by reporting. News can make or break a community by influencing decision-making or by pressing the panic button. This session began by examining the extent to which journals go to publish information to the community and then looked at whether a journal should publish all, some, or none of the information, depending on the consequences.

Journalists, particularly science writers, should always assume that a majority of the audience is not familiar with scientific terminology. The audience of this session was asked, as a group including editors of scientific journals, what responsibilities

and factors should be considered when assessing information for the audience. They came up with several: (1) the difference between public knowledge and the scholarly world in the boundary between the rights of citizens and the right to access; (2) public goods, which belong to society; (3) public health with respect to

*As information becomes  
more and more  
accessible and easier to  
publish through the Web,  
maintaining the public's  
trust in science is crucial.*

diseases and viruses; (4) politics; (5) terrorism, safety, and security; (6) availability of data; (7) taxpayer support of research; (8) accessibility; and (9) responsiveness.

Several people control what actually reaches readers, as demonstrated by the chain owner-publisher-editor-editorial board-staff-readers.

The mission statement of medical and science journals is universal: to ensure fair publication of valid scientific information by providing sufficient editorial processes to authors and content and to eliminate and acknowledge biases. Through several examples that have occurred throughout his own career, such as the anthrax attacks in 2001, and the period of international

ground-beef contamination, John Ward illustrated how an editor could or should go about dealing with the FBI and other federal departments when asked to withhold publication of details and statistics to the public.

As information becomes more and more accessible and easier to publish through the Web, maintaining the public's trust in science is crucial. Through the process of editorial reviewing, research and findings will be distributed broadly, quickly, and accurately. Ward summarized his presentation by reminding editors to consider the consequences, set priorities for their information, and make sure that information to be published has some benefit to society. He also quoted Frank Davidoff: "Science doesn't exist until it is read."

Hemai Parthasarathy stated that "medicine is a social science" and therefore should be available to everyone. She described scientific publishing as an ecosystem and discussed the need to make science more useful and available to the interested public. One method is the open-access journal. The open-access journal has many advantages, from the authors' perspective (it gives their work the widest audience) and from the audience's perspective (it gives them the entirety of literature and the ability to reuse articles for teaching and archiving).

The Public Library of Science, where Parthasarathy works, encourages open access after 6 months and has launched its own open-access journal to demonstrate the benefits of open access. 