

NASW Workshops Feature Editors, Others

David Barry

On an exceptionally sunny February morning in Seattle, over 400 members and guests of the National Association of Science Writers (NASW) convened to discuss, among other things, their role as science reporters in a grim world of biologic and nuclear weapons and mass-casualty terrorism. The 2004 NASW workshops began with a plenary session titled "Science in the New World Order/Disorder".

Christopher Chyba, codirector of Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation, expressed concern that the US government has become less capable of dealing with scientific issues over the past 10 years, even as threats from infectious diseases and biologic terrorism have multiplied. Chyba said the elimination of the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment and the diminished influence of the presidential scientific adviser amounted to a "self-lobotomy" by the government.

Chyba warned that a communication breakdown between scientists and policy-makers could have disastrous consequences, and he assigned the mass media the crucial role of helping the two camps to communicate. Barbara Seiders, biodefense program manager at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, agreed that scientific communication is important but cautioned journalists to consider the harm potentially caused by publishing sensitive information.

James Cook, a plant pathologist at Washington State University, raised the specter of agricultural bioterrorism and said

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that the mass media should be aware of two strategies for meeting the threat: prevention and preparedness. Preparedness depends on scientific openness and teamwork, said Cook. Public distrust, the so-called fear factor, is the greatest vulnerability of the food system. In cases of food-safety fears, the mass media should seek information about food safety from public leaders, because the public "doesn't necessarily trust all scientists", Cook said.

After the sobering plenary session, the breakout session "Science for Sale" considered how money influences science and how journalists should report on conflicts of interest. Marcia Angell, former editor-in-chief of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, defined a conflict of interest as any condition in which there is an incentive to distort work. She said that there is considerable evidence that medical literature has been biased by the conditions of drug-company research sponsorship. Drug companies have recently taken a more hands-on approach to funding academic research, said Angell, guiding the design of experiments and insisting on seeing manuscripts before publication. She did not know how often the drug companies that sponsor research might suppress the results of valid studies.

Angell said that she was surprised to discover that many reporters don't ask sources about conflicts of interest. One newspaper reporter had explained to her, "We don't ask because we don't want to know the answer." Reporters are afraid that they might lose a carefully cultivated source if they probe too deeply, she said, either by offending the source or by causing an editor to reject the source. She advised reporters to approach the subject gently by asking scientists, "Do you have any financial connections?" rather than "Do you have any

conflicts of interest?" Sheldon Rampton, editor of *PR Watch*, added that reporting conflicts of interest in articles should be the norm, just like stating statistical significance in scientific papers.

At the session "Pictures and Words: Collaborating with Artists", panelists described how images should convey science to the public. Graphic designer Pat Hansen suggested applying a 5-1-10 test to graphics: Pictures should provide some information after 5 seconds of viewing, more after 1 minute, and much more after 10 minutes. Whitney Stensrud, the graphics desk editor of the *Seattle Times*, advised writers to think about graphics continually and learn to recognize when words are too much or not enough.

At the "Politicization of Science" workshop, Cornelia Dean, a former science editor at the *New York Times*, said that journalists must "get better at modulating our stories so that readers can better tell where the bulk of opinion is." She said journalists worry so much about getting both sides of a story that the reader ends up imagining that there is a debate when in fact there is consensus. Dean added that journalists are different from scientists in that "journalists don't want to hear about uncertainty, and scientists aren't happy unless there are error bars." Alexandra Witze, of the *Dallas Morning News*, said that writers should argue for a longer story on complex science issues because short stories can be meaningless.

Other workshops included "Reporting Science: Do Science Writers Always Get It Right?", "Science, Security & Privacy", "University and Magazine Web Sites: Raising Science Awareness", and "Science Literacy and Democracy". The full program of the workshops has been posted on the Web at nasw.org. 