

# Editorial Highlights of the 2004 AAAS Meeting

## Joshua Harris

Scientists and science communicators crowded the crosswalks in downtown Seattle during the 2004 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), held 12-16 February. Whereas most of the sessions focused primarily on scientific research, several addressed topics related specifically to science editing.

At the session "Writing a Successful Trade Science Book: Helpful Hints from the Joseph Henry Press", Jeffrey Robbins, senior editor at the Joseph Henry Press (JHP), a branch of the National Academies Press, explained one of the biggest requirements for a popular science book. "The science has to be explained in a way that makes it interesting and understandable", he said. "Nonscientists depend on these books to teach them about science."

Robin Pinnel, publicist for JHP, added that authors should look at the amount of marketing money a publisher will put behind his or her book. She added that publishers like authors who can gain independent exposure. "Personal media contacts are a huge help for publicity", she said.

A panel of authors who have had their work published by JHP shared their knowledge for aspiring writers. "Write what you love; write what you have knowledge about", said Marcia Bartusiak, author of *Einstein's Unfinished Symphony*. "Look at books as an investment, look at them as your first step in your career." Two of the authors stressed the importance of presenting correct information. According to Sidney Perkowitz, author of *Digital People*, the "general principle for writing is a bit like the oath a physician takes: 'First, do no harm.' You must present the science accurately."

"Ask yourself what the reader needs to know", said David Lindley, author of *Degrees Kelvin*. "It's not like a textbook."

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Often, scientists must communicate to a much broader audience than in the past to obtain funding for their research. At the session "Writing for and Presenting Scientific Information to Non-Technical Audiences", tips were given on how a scientist can disclose his or her work to the public. The tips have evolved over time and will continue to change with scientific advancements. A survey taken in 2001 showed that 92% of Americans identify themselves as interested in science, but only 14% feel well informed. Another survey in that same year revealed that most people get their information about science and technology from television, whereas the Internet is used to gather information on specific scientific issues.

The session "Bridging the Divide: Preserving Scientific Research and Protecting Individual Privacy" focused on the implications of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) for scientific research. "The issues embedded in medical-information privacy are extraordinarily complicated", said David Korn, of the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC). "They are very poorly understood by a general public that has become increasingly sensitive about matters of individual privacy as information technology has become ever more powerful, expansive, and intrusive."

At the same session, Kenneth Prewitt, director of international and public affairs at Columbia University, argued against the restrictions that HIPAA has placed on all research. "The research apparatus in the United States depends on two types of data: administrative data, which are necessarily identifiable, and statistical data, which, by definition, are not about people", he said. Under HIPAA, even statistical data can become useless if people don't answer questions because they fear for their privacy. "There are no statistical data if people don't answer questions", Prewitt said. "Information is indispensable for the functioning of the US government."

The session "Pop Physics—The Interface Between Hard Science and Popular Culture" was one of the most entertaining sessions at the meeting. The main speaker, Timothy Gay, a physics professor at the University of Nebraska, kept the audience laughing throughout his presentation with dry wit and sarcasm, all without losing his meaning. Gay is the host of *Football Physics*, which airs during pauses in the action at Cornhuskers home games at Memorial Stadium in Lincoln, Nebraska. Gay said the idea was first presented to him 5 years ago by the head of the audiovisual department at the University of Nebraska. Gay, a "shameless self-promoter", jumped at the opportunity. *Football Physics* has made the 78,000 football fans in Memorial Stadium into the largest physics class in the world. The *Football Physics* segments can be viewed on the Internet at [physics.unl.edu/outreach/football.html](http://physics.unl.edu/outreach/football.html).

Some other sessions also included items related to science editing. The session "Virtual Science Museum Development: Technology, Interoperability and Collaboration" included a presentation by Terry Yates, of the Natural Science Collections Alliance, about the importance to research of the virtual museums as natural collections continue to deteriorate. "It is no longer sufficient to just have samples in a drawer somewhere", he said. "Natural-history collections are critical infrastructures for the nations of the world." At the session "Career Path Analyses: Implications for Graduate Education", Renate Sadrozinski, senior research sociologist at the Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education, University of Washington, presented her findings from a study concerning sex equality after graduate education and what colleges and universities can do to promote it.

For further information on the 2004 AAAS annual meeting, please see [www.aaas.org/meetings](http://www.aaas.org/meetings). Audiotapes of sessions can be ordered from AVEN, telephone (206) 440-7989 or (800) 810-8273, [www.aven.com](http://www.aven.com). 