

NASW, CASW Hold Joint Meeting; Magazine Editors Speak

Rita M Washko

The first joint meeting of the National Association of Science Writers (NASW) and the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing (CASW) was held on 22-26 October in Pittsburgh, PA. An NASW-CASW luncheon bridged the transition from topics specific to science writers and editors to briefings about some of the latest developments in science, technology, and medicine.

NASW sessions were planned around four themes: building a freelance business, ways of delivering science information to the public (geared toward public information officers), authority and credibility issues in science communication, and tools for improving the craft of writing science and other nonfiction. Two workshops focused exclusively on editorial issues: “The NASW Pitch Slam” and “Mastering the Art and Business of Science Editing”.

The pitch slam featured a panel of four top science-magazine editors; they spoke briefly about how story ideas are developed at their publications and then responded to 60-second story pitches from audience members. Mariette DiChristina, executive editor of *Scientific American*, stated that the magazine’s science feature stories are a “horse’s-mouth look at science” in that the scientists themselves are the “expert authors”. At times, however, *Scientific American* looks beyond the scientists for stories. Such situations are those requiring a lot of legwork, those involving a “controversial topic about which no researcher’s opinion would represent the broad field”, and those in which the nonscientist writer has some unique expertise or is in a geographically favorable position to do a story.

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Discover Magazine’s senior editor, Corey Powell, said that his magazine looks at the world “through the lens of science [and presents] stories that tell you how to understand the world”. Unlike *Scientific American* stories, the science features in *Discover Magazine* are written by freelancers, not scientists, and thus are “more heavily narrative and personality-driven”. Powell explained that his magazine looks at the “ethereal end of what science does”. The real test for stories is the element of surprise. He advised writers to get past the noise of what people are seeing on CNN and write a story narrative or interesting piece that others have not heard.

The senior associate editor for *Popular Science*, Nicole Dyer, said that her magazine’s primary interest is in “exotic technology”. She highlighted the magazine’s “What’s New” section as one that profiles “a gallery of cool, unusual gadgets” and then spoke about the science news included in the magazine as “our anchor to reality”. “Our readers are curious about the mechanics of things.”

The final panelist in the pitch slam was *Good Housekeeping’s* health editor, Toni Hope. She noted that her magazine’s readers are “the health gatekeepers of their families”, and the magazine runs health pieces that would be of interest to a woman with a family.

After the editors’ opening comments, they responded to story pitches from conference attendees. In general, the editors emphasized that writers should thoroughly read the science magazine to which they want to pitch their stories and should familiarize themselves with the focus and tone of the articles. It is important to get a sense of what has been published by a magazine during the preceding year. Dyer said that her magazine is interested in stories about people who are thinking about how to solve big problems. Before pitching such stories, however, a writer must get a

feel “for the unified voice throughout the magazine”. Hope added that, when pitching the editor, a writer should be clear as to why he or she is the best person to write the story. Overall, the pitch slam was similar to the process of the editorial meetings at the individual science magazines, according to the participating editors.

“Mastering the Art and Business of Science Editing” also explored editor–science writer interactions, but from a different perspective. A panel of “seasoned science-editing pros” discussed how to improve the relationship between editors and writers, how to improve editing skills, and how freelance editors could hone their marketing and business practices.

Tim Appenzeller, senior editor for science at *National Geographic*, stated that if you, the writer, have a good voice, you should “discover everything you can do to preserve it”. He cautioned that editors should not forget what it is like to be edited. “Think about the challenges the writer faced.” Ivan Amato, associate editor of *Science News*, suggested that editors should tell writers what they like about the writers’ stories because this reinforces good writing. Good writing has a logical line throughout a story and has “great transitions” between concepts. While facilitating good writing, editors should keep in mind for whom they are working, Amato said. “I consider myself the champion of the reader”, he said.

The remaining two panelists—Adrienne Rippinger, a freelance editor of allied-health textbooks, and Jeffrey Rothfeder, a contributing editor of *Popular Science*—focused on business aspects of science editing. Rippinger is an acquisitions editor who writes her own book-project proposals, pitches them to publishing companies, and then shepherds these long-term projects to completion. Along the way, she hires professional science writers and teams them with subject-matter authors; from there,

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she turns the projects over to developmental editors. The developmental editors, Rippinger explained, work one-on-one with the authors. The process also involves production editors, who in turn hire copyeditors. These days, copyediting is almost always outsourced, she said. In addition, Rippinger oversees the timelines of the projects and their reviews. “Everything gets reviewed, from the outline to the textbook pages”, she said.

Rothfeder offered some insights into editing as a freelance. “You must come in with a broader area than just science”, he said. For example, business and politics are increasingly important as they both affect science. A freelance editor’s “value is what you can bring ‘extra’ to the publication”, Rothfeder said. As a freelance editor, “you’re going to get the worst stories, those most difficult to edit. The stories I tended to get were the ‘orphan’ stories when [I was] working as [a freelance] editor”. In addition, there is a disadvantage when the

editor is not part of the office atmosphere and culture—politics could work against the editor because he or she is not there to address issues as soon as they arise in relation to a story. Overall, he said, it is important to keep in mind that the editor-writer relationship is collaborative. “Do not trample on the writers. Otherwise, you will not have good writers to work with and then will be left editing poorly researched and written studies. It could become a vicious circle”, Rothfeder concluded.

The remainder of the NASW sessions included topics of credibility and authority in speaking for science, improving the craft of science writing, and a look at newsletters and blogs from a science-communication perspective.

Distinguished scientists hosted the CASW sessions that followed. Collectively called “New Horizons in Science Briefing”, the presentations covered a wide territory: a new category of anticancer agents, those that work on

the transcription of DNA; targeting the dendritic cell as a means of developing cancer vaccines; DNA repair and its relation to aging; new brain-imaging studies that allow a look at neural connections; the ability to conduct virtual experiments; the Carnegie Mellon University’s CERT program, a system that monitors worldwide computer security; anger as a useful response in difficult situations; possible ways of concurrently addressing three major global problems—the energy crisis, nuclear threats, and global warming; “Families and Wealth”, a look at economic and occupational consequences of such factors as birth order and education; “Toxins and Disease Inheritance”; “Adolescent Decision Making”; and “Infant Thinking”. 🗨️