Charting the New World of Science Journalism Online: Ethical Quandaries and Challenges

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Stephen J A Ward began the session by saying that he would base his talk on recent interviews with print (not online, as the session's title suggested) science journalists. He briefly reviewed goals (including education, public outreach, and research) of the University of British Columbia School of Journalism and set the stage for Eric Jandciu's discussion of recent journalism students' interviews with print science journalists.

Ward said that problems facing science journalists include the fragmentation, competition, and "hype" of the mass media and the realities of newsroom constraints: deadlines, word counts, and reference checking. Science journalists are caught between two perspectives, he said: that of journalists who feel that scientists are incapable of talking plainly and lack understanding of journalistic realities, such as deadlines, and that of scientists who feel that journalists have no ethics. Science journalists contend with a communication revolution in which the role, public perceptions, and technology of media are changing. (Media are now more empowering than didactic and are more about social networking than about public education.) Ward also discussed roles of science journalists: translator, explaining science to the public; advocate, giving the public information to make decisions; and participant, engaging and involving the public.

Next, Jandciu explained how he and the student researchers studied the views and roles of science journalists. First, they identified science journalists. Second, they designed, tested, and refined interview questions—both general ("What is science journalists' role in society, and what are some challenges they face?") and specific ("What resources do you use?"). Finally, they conducted the interviews and analyzed the data.

The number-one source of science news stories was found to be refereed, scholarly articles. Other sources included newspapers, health agencies, conferences, the Internet, press releases, current events, family and friends, and public-relations (PR) personnel. Science journalists identified their roles as informer, interest piquer, cynicism revealer, verifier, educator, filterer, and standup comedian—translating dry information into something interesting.

Science journalists identified the following challenges: finding the right person to explain issues and topics (someone who can meet deadlines and doesn't speak jargon), identifying important and interesting topics, understanding scientific stories despite a lack of science knowledge, contextualizing a story in little space, lacking resources to meet scientists face to face, dealing with scientists who are not media savvy, and selling science news in a small market for science reporting.

The 25 interviewees also offered solutions: training scientists in journalism and journalists in science; providing more professional development for journalists (for example, attendance at science conferences or university science courses); educating editors about scientific issues; providing more time, space, and financial resources for science stories; and encouraging better PR from the scientific community.

Ward spoke after Jandciu about issues in scientific journalism: journals' handling of print news versus online news, journals' publishing of ideas that are contrary to the sponsoring organization or that present subscribers negatively, and journals' printing of articles from citizen-scientists.

Open discussion followed. One audience member asked about benefits of a scientific organization's sponsorship of a journalism intern. The panel said that the advantages were great as long as the intern also benefited. Another question focused on local news, and the panel agreed that local science makes excellent science stories. A question about PR packages elicited advice for PR personnel to be aware of the tone of PR pieces, avoid scooping journalists, and avoid making journalists unwitting PR personnel. A follow-up question on teaching journalism students about PR evoked advice to teach the PR process and simulate a news conference. A question about using Web 2.0 and 3.0 generated discussion of the sometimes blurred distinction between credentialed experts and armchair scientists and of the need, especially when the mass media provide health information, to separate bogus from legitimate reporting.

The session ended with suggestions from Ward: Science journals should provide instructions for the mass media as well as instructions for authors, scientists discussing their research should check to see how much journalists already know, and journalists should speak to corresponding authors of journal articles.