

UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

By Nadine Böke

On the first day of the sixth world conference of science journalists, held in June in London, *Wired* magazine's Ben Hammersley expressed the controversial opinion that there are simply too many science journalists.

Hammersley believes there will be a process of natural selection in the next few years, which only a few of the best science journalists will survive. Other participants were more optimistic, pointing out that even though journalism in general is in crisis, science journalism is still extremely important.

But the future of science journalism wasn't just a hot topic at the conference. Some leading scientific journals also joined in. A month before the conference, the journal *Nature Biotechnology* reported on a workshop, organised by the Health Law Centre at the University of Alberta, on the future of science journalism, titled "Science communication reconsidered", which was attended by leading science communicators from the US, Britain, Canada, Germany and Australia.

These experts drafted a list of eight recommendations, carried by *Nature Biotechnology*, aimed at evolving science communication, including a call for journalism schools to teach students about science policy making, and the call for alternative funding (for example, by foundations, universities or governments) to ensure quality science journalism in a perishing media environment. (See <http://tinyurl.com/8recommendations>.)

The authors also see possibilities for science journalism in the form of web portals offering both professionally produced content and user-generated content, thereby stimulating public participation.

In its June editorial on science journalism, *Nature* calls for scientists and scientific institutions to help proper science journalism survive. For example, through learning how to best talk to journalists; by helping them gain access to information; and by helping them find the right people to comment on the subject they're reporting on.

Toby Murcott, a former science correspondent for the BBC, argues in *Nature* that science journalists today can be compared to priests. For the most part they just take information from a source of authority and communicate it to the congregation. But, to best serve our audiences, we, as science journalists, should also provide depth, context and criticism. But

this isn't easy when you are working under constant time pressure.

Murcott believes one way in which this priesthood model of science journalism can be toppled without too much effort is to report more on the process through which science is produced and reviewed. Also, Murcott asks for press officers at universities and research journals to help journalists by providing them with more background information and context on new findings than they do at the moment.

Probably having witnessed some of the changes himself, Boyce Rensberger, who has been a science reporter for 32 years, writes about the way science journalists have changed "from cheerleaders to watchdogs" during the past century. In the first half of the 20th century science journalists hailed everything scientists did. When, in the 1970s and 1980s, it became clear that science and technology also sometimes have adverse effects and could be controversial, science reporting became increasingly critical. Rensberger believes we are again facing changes in the role of science journalism. These are mostly due to digitalisation. It is, for instance, hard for the public to judge which of the numerous online sources are reliable and which aren't. So, if science journalists are to regain relevance to society, they should learn how to master new media.

Nature also carries an opinion article by Nadia El-Awady, the newly elected president of the WFSJ, who writes about science journalism in Arabic countries. In the past few decades, the Arab world has seen a vast growth in the amount of scientific research being done as well as increased interest in science.

Although science journalists have gained a fairly stable position in Arab countries, El-Awady also sees some challenges. Quantity is not necessarily the same as quality. Science journalists are not always able to provide critical coverage of claims made by the institutions that pay them. Also, science journalists in the Arab world often have deep reverence for scientists or are working as a part-time scientist themselves. This can make it hard for them to maintain a critical perspective in their journalistic work.

El-Awady argues that we should pay attention to these weaknesses; or the rise of science journalism in the Arab world may be the harbinger of its downfall.

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