

JOURNALISTS WHO CHANGE THE WORLD

SCIENCE, LIKE DEMOCRACY, WORKS BEST
IN THE CLEAR LIGHT OF ACCOUNTABILITY,
WRITES DEBORAH BLUM



USEFUL LINK

Nature's special issue of 25 June 2009 dedicated to science journalism can be found online at www.tinyurl.com/sciencejournalism

We talk these days about the future of science journalism, by which we usually mean its migration from traditional habitats – printed words on paper, radio stations on the dial, television networks – into the 21st century landscape. Most of us see that landscape as a technological one, transformed by blogging and webcasting, Twitter and Facebook, and possibilities to be yet invented.

But as journalism evolves into a product of new media, it's important to also consider not only what will change – also what we should keep. Lovers of

language, who can turn an ordinary event into a compelling story, are still needed. Talented science writers who make a complex experiment accessible to those without science training remain invaluable. And investigative reporters provide an essential service that, I hope, will never disappear.

I was reminded of the last point during the World Conference of Science Journalists in London in June, where I moderated a panel, "Four Journalists Who Changed the World". It's an ambitious concept, don't you think? Yet, the journalists on the panel – from Nigeria, Canada, Japan and the United States – lived up to the billing.

Alex Abutu Augustine, science correspondent for the News Agency of Nigeria, conducted several meticulous investigations of scientists who had made exaggerated claims about their research. He looked into others who had concealed the risks of pharmaceuticals. He continued doing so even though the subjects of his stories repeatedly tried to scare him off, using tactics that ranged from lawsuits to death threats. His stories kept unqualified candidates out of government positions and stopped the distribution of unsafe products.

Andre Picard wrote a series exposing tainted blood supplies in Canada and government attempts to cover up the risks. He was also vilified in public and threatened with legal action. But, again, the stories were published and they led to a complete overhaul in management of his country's medical blood supply

system, undoubtedly saving many lives.

Yukiko Motomura of Japan explored the status, training and career paths of scientists in her country. She startled her readers with the realisation that far from embracing those with science training, the country's culture often made it

difficult for them to advance. Her newspaper series led to a bestselling book and prompted the Japanese government to begin seeking reforms to better support its researchers.

And **Shannon Brownlee**, a freelance writer based in the Washington DC area, spent years investigating the costly and risky operation of the American medical system, exposing flawed treatments based, in some cases, on shoddy science.

I have other examples beyond the panel. Here's one from my country, the United States. In mid-July, the *Los Angeles Times* published a detailed report on the board that oversees nurses in the state. The board had ignored problems and allowed incompetent or even criminally behaved nurses – some had lost their tempers and injured patients – to continue working. Within the week, the governor fired a majority of the lax board members and replaced them with people determined to improve the situation.

One of the interesting aspects of the California story is that the investigation was done in tandem with a non-profit investigative reporting centre, ProPublica. The centre was funded to ensure that investigative journalism remains a priority in the United States.

At the University of Wisconsin where I teach investigative reporting, we host another such centre, the Wisconsin Centre for Investigative Journalism. Later this year, one of my classes will collaborate with the centre in investigating access to health care.

Ask any committed journalist about this emphasis on investigative journalism and he or she will tell you that there is no democracy without a watchdog media, that governments cannot be held accountable without journalists dogging their actions. But the same principle holds true for science. It works best in a clear light of accountability.

Science is, after all, a human enterprise, which means that it is subject to the usual human failings. Researchers are not always honest. Money can skew the process. So can politics. We need good, well-trained, curious and sceptical journalists to explore science in all its dimensions. We need coverage not only of the exciting and innovative aspects but the troubled ones. Such scrutiny not only keeps our readers, viewers and listeners intelligently informed, it protects them. It's only by finding and highlighting flaws in the system, that they are corrected.

We need more, many more reporters, exactly like those who participated in the London conference panel. They remind us about what's best in what we do. We all hope they'll keep doing it. And I'd like to take this moment to salute my London panellists but, also, all of you out there who are chasing a story that will help change the world.

This was originally published on the World Federation of Science Journalists blog at www.wfsj.org

SURGE OF SCIENCE

WHILE THE FUTURE OF SCIENCE JOURNALISM IS INCREASINGLY UNCERTAIN IN DEVELOPED COUNTRIES, THERE IS AN INCREASING THIRST FOR SCIENTIFIC NEWS IN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST, WRITES AISLING IRWIN

Science journalism is thriving in parts of the developing world while coming under severe pressure in some developed countries. In Africa and the Middle East, journalists are reporting a greater demand for stories about science from both the public and newspaper editors.

But in the United States, the number of science journalists on the staff of newspapers has dropped sharply and some respected outlets have axed their science departments.

"We seem to be regarded as the luxury item," Pallab Ghosh, president of the World Federation

of Science Journalists, told the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Chicago, United States, earlier this year.

The US television network CNN closed its entire environmental, science and technology unit this year and the *Boston Globe's* once distinguished science section is gradually being eliminated.

The number of dedicated science sections in newspapers fell from about 95 to 34 between 1989 and 2005, according to the US National Association of Science Writers.

In contrast, speakers from Africa, the Middle East and Latin America were optimistic about a surge of interest in science and science journalism in their countries.

"The loss in this part of the world is more or less a gain in our own part of the world," said Akin Jimoh, programme director of the Development Communications Network in Lagos, Nigeria.

"Science journalism is growing [in Africa]. Associations of science journalists are being formed

in quite a number of countries. They have organised conferences in their countries to influence science policy."

An informal survey of 40 African and Arab science journalists completed in February found that many perceived an increase in space allocated to science stories in the past five years, said Nadia El-Awady, past president of the Arab Science Journalists Association.

Journalists reported a growing interest in science and an increasing desire from editors to publish science articles. Paradoxically, efforts by the developed world to train and mentor developing world journalists have paid off, many said.

Other reasons cited were a new interest on behalf of media organisations in promoting science as a means of development and more international attention on issues such as global warming.

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