ScienceWriters2020: Highlights for Editors Too

Christina B Sumners, Ava English, September V Martin, Chi-Hsuan Sung, Jennifer Reiley, Melissa Espinoza, and Barbara Gastel

As professional societies continued holding gatherings electronically because of the coronavirus pandemic, October 2020 brought an abundance of online offerings for science editors and others working in the communication of science. There were the Council of Science Editors Fall Virtual Symposium and the American Medical Writers Association 2020 Medical Writing and Communication Conference. And also, there was ScienceWriters2020.

Held jointly by the National Association of Science Writers (NASW) and the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing (CASW), the annual ScienceWriters meeting includes workshops on the communication of science and briefings on current scientific research. The current report presents highlights of several ScienceWriters2020 science communication workshops, with emphasis on content that may especially interest science editors and those in related realms.

How Does Your Institution #scicomm?

By Christina B Sumners

The impetus for this session was a survey Kelly Tyrrell and Sara Zaske, two NASW members, sent journalists and institutional science writers. One major issue they explored was the relative effectiveness of a centralized versus decentralized approach to science communication: in other words, whether each unit in an organization had a communications person or all communications were run top-down from one office. They found that either structure can work and there is little relationship to the institution's effectiveness at sharing science stories with reporters. However, about 40% of science writers working at institutions said their organization can do better at sharing information with the public and news media.

Science writers at 3 universities shared how their institutions' communications function. Each emphasized communicating between units, regardless of structure, and noted pros and cons of centralized and decentralized approaches.

CHRISTINA B SUMNERS, AVA ENGLISH, SEPTEMBER V. MARTIN, CHI-HSUAN SUNG, JENNIFER REILEY, and MELISSA ESPINOZA are graduate students, and BARBARA GASTEL is a professor, at Texas A&M University.

Michele Berger at the University of Pennsylvania said their system is decentralized, with a communications person at each school within the university.

Andy Fell at the University of California, Davis explained they used a more centralized system, although individual colleges have communicators focusing on specific audiences such as alumni, donors, or prospective students, while the central office produces communications for the general public. The 2 groups can reuse content for the different audiences.

Reba Hernandez at the University of Florida Engineering School of Sustainable Infrastructure & Environment said she has found it important to communicate what is occurring in her unit to the university's central communications office. Doing so helps share resources and avoid duplication of efforts.

The Art of the Interview: Getting Sources to Bring Stories to Life

By Ava English

This session, which focused largely on overcoming challenges in journalistic interviewing, started with a video of the moderator, Christie Wilcox, interviewing the panelists: Sarah McQuate, a public information officer at the University of Washington; Adriana Gallardo, a reporter at ProPublica; and Stephanie Lee, a reporter at BuzzFeed News.

McQuate said that although her role differs from that of a journalist, each writer has the same goal: to connect with the researchers and communicate engaging stories. McQuate's work includes educating researchers on what to expect when working with journalists.

Gallardo writes mainly long-form investigative pieces; she covers sensitive topics, including maternal mortality and sexual assault. Sometimes she must therefore adjust her interview style. For example, for an article about maternal mortality among African Americans, Gallardo sat in on conversations between mothers and daughters instead of conducting interviews herself.

Gallardo recommended having a designated space for sensitive interviews, avoiding over-apologizing if an interviewee shares difficult information, and, to protect one's own mental health, not scheduling too many difficult interviews consecutively.

Lee also has experience with challenging interviews, such as those with people accused of sexual misconduct. She emphasized "doing your homework" beforehand. She also suggested offering to talk to people on background or off the record in the early stages of research.

Wilcox asked each panelist how COVID-19 had influenced her reporting. Lee said she missed in-person interviews. McQuate agreed, saying it is easier to catch animated moments in person. Gallardo said her biggest current challenge is collaborating on projects virtually.

The session concluded with a question-and-answer segment.

Telling Stories That Include Indigenous Perspectives

By September V Martin

Panelists at this session discussed various aspects of including Indigenous perspectives in science writing. These aspects included building relationships, respecting boundaries, avoiding problematic language, navigating differences in world view, and recognizing how science can marginalize Indigenous ways of knowing.

Dina Gilio-Whitaker, lecturer in Indian studies at California State University San Marcos, addressed "decolonizing science." Her points included the following: U.S. history was shaped by settler colonialism, a process of invasion and violence toward Indigenous people. Science also has evolved in this context and has been used as a tool against Indigenous people throughout its history. Science is considered superior to other ways of knowing, thus marginalizing Indigenous knowledge. This concept of science should be dismantled.

Lenzy Krehbiel-Burton, freelance journalist and vice president of the Native American Journalists Association, explained that it takes time and patience to build relationships with Indigenous communities. She emphasized listening and showing up regularly, not just when something is needed. She also highlighted that stories from members of the community are a good source of information. Jodi Rave Spotted Bear, executive director of the Indigenous Media Freedom Alliance, added that getting to know the community and letting elders and cultural leaders share and speak on their own terms are important.

Christine Weeber, an editor at *SAPIENS* magazine, discussed problematic terms, including *artifact*. Using *artifact* to refer to objects from Indigenous societies isolates these items from their true purposes by making them seem historical or obsolete.

The panel also recommended several resources to help journalists understand and represent Indigenous perspectives.

Institutional Storytelling: Navigating the Scientist's Review

By Chi-Hsuan Sung

When a news release or other institutional writing for the public features a scientist's work, the scientist normally reviews it for accuracy before posting or publication. Sometimes, however, difficulties arise, for example when a scientist wants to convert lay language to jargon. Speakers at this session shared advice for obtaining suitable review.

Ann Brody Guy, a freelancer whose clients include the University of California, Berkeley, emphasized managing scientists' expectations, for instance by supplying an introductory message. When inappropriate changes are requested, she sometimes invokes the need to follow best practices for writing and publishing or says, "Let me talk it over with my editor."

Lisa Chiu, of BrainFacts.org and the Society for Neuroscience, described competing interests of journalists and scientists and characterized her team as being in the middle. She recommended sending copy as PDFs, so as not to invite editing. She also said to remind scientists of the audience and goals.

Ken Kostel, of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, emphasized cultivating good relationships with scientists. Because he works in a small town, he often sees scientists from his institution at the store or elsewhere. He said this day-to-day interaction helps build rapport. "Collaborate with them," Kostel said. He and others also recommended finding teachable moments.

Ariel Bleicher, of *UCSF Magazine*, provided additional tips. These included writing comments on copy to indicate which items to focus on in reviewing, providing explanations, and offering compromises.

Breakout sessions followed. A desk manual providing points from the presentations and breakout sessions has been prepared.

Taking Care of Yourself: Mental Health and Science Journalism

By Jennifer Reiley

This session addressed educating science journalists on the importance of self-care, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Whether you work in journalism or communications, the work that we do is really stressful," said moderator Erin Ross. "It's high-paced, and dealing with that and struggling with that is absolutely legitimate."

The panelists gave tips on integrating self-care practices into the workday. Ideas included taking half-hour walks, scheduling

time to meditate, and taking breaks on days off and between tasks. "Activities that provide support, that strengthen you, that help with relaxation, that give you a challenge different than work, that recharge you, or that change how you think about work are the kinds of things that are really good," said Elana Newman, a clinical psychologist and research director at the DART Center on Journalism and Trauma.

Luisa Ortiz Pérez, executive director and founder of Vita Activa, a peer support network, said COVID-19 has introduced problems such as Zoom fatigue. But she said practicing self-care tactics can help mitigate them.

April Reese, freelance science and environment journalist, acknowledged that approaching an editor about issues is intimidating but pointed out that editors also struggle.

Joanne Griffith, managing editor of NPR's California newsroom collaboration, said she now includes mental health check-ins with her staff. "There is a duty of care and responsibility that we have to our audience," Griffith said, "but we are not going to be any use to our audience if we're not taking care of our staff."

Making Connections: SEO and Writing for K-12 Audiences

By Melissa Espinoza

Easily accessible high-quality educational writing about science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) can spark curiosity and attract students to STEM careers. This session addressed producing such writing for audiences at the kindergarten-through-12th-grade (K-12) level.

Readability is key for educational writing. Accordingly, speakers Emily Rhode and Jocelyn Solis-Moreira, of Science Connected, noted the following: Science communicators should write for the appropriate age group and, in the United States, address the Next Generation Science Standards for each topic. The writing should be relevant and recent. It should help kids connect to the topic and motivate them to keep learning. Funny headlines, pop culture references, metaphors, and imagery can enliven content. Also helpful are asking questions kids might ask, challenging beliefs and norms, telling stories, and invoking the senses. Writers can use free websites to score readability based on average lengths of words, sentences, and paragraphs.

Once readable and relatable STEM content is created, writers can use search engine optimization (SEO) to increase the visibility and accessibility of their work. Kate Stone, founder and CEO of Science Connected, explained that, like a filing system, SEO helps search engine algorithms label and sort content, helping educators find what they need. She recommended the following: Have a good, descriptive title with keywords (especially nouns, verbs, and adjectives) near the beginning. Include keywords in captions, alt text, meta-descriptions, and subheadings, and use them 5 or 6 times in the body. However, avoid overusing keywords, as doing so can cause content to be flagged as spam or click bait.

Video recordings of most ScienceWriters2020 sessions are available online. Registrants for the conference can access them until April 23, 2021. In addition, others can purchase access to the set of videos; information in this regard appears at https://sciencewriters.regfox.com/sciencewriters2020-video-access.