



# ScienceWriters™

National Association  
of Science Writers, Inc.

Winter  
2008-09

CNN  
SLASHES SCIENCE  
AND TECHNOLOGY UNIT

NASW HONORS  
THE INCOMPARABLE  
**DIANE**  
MCGURGAN

A Q&A WITH DAVID  
**PERLMAN**  
ON FIVE DECADES IN  
SCIENCE JOURNALISM

THE CONNECTIVITY OF  
**TWITTER**

RESULTS OF NASW BOARD  
**ELECTION**



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# FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the redesign of *ScienceWriters*. Why a magazine and why now? Launched more than 50 years ago as a mimeographed newsletter, *ScienceWriters* has increased over the decades in size, content, and scope in keeping with the growth and influence of NASW as the professional organization for science writers.

Starting with the cover art, the magazine will feature intriguing images that reflect the different fields that science writers cover. Inside, you'll find more original reporting and fewer reprints. Columns and sections have received new treatments. The publication is also more wholly integrated with the NASW website, with online links for URLs and e-mails and easier navigation of archived issues.

The goal of all these improvements is a look and usability of *ScienceWriters* that rises to the level of quality journalism you've always found in its pages. The redesign also underscores *ScienceWriters* as the outreach flagship for NASW in its efforts to convey—both to science writers and those who hire them—the organization's undisputed role as a network, resource, and advocate for the profession and the vital contributions made by science writers.

I welcome feedback on the new *ScienceWriters*.



Lynne Friedmann

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# CNN Cuts Entire Science, Tech Team

BY CURTIS BRAINARD

**C**NN, the Cable News Network, announced on Dec. 3 that it will cut its entire science, technology, and environment news staff, including Miles O'Brien, its chief technology and environment correspondent, as well as six executive producers. Mediabistro's TVNewser broke the story.

"We want to integrate environmental, science, and technology reporting into the general editorial structure rather than have a stand-alone unit," said CNN spokesperson Barbara Levin. "Now that the bulk of our environmental coverage is being offered through the 'Planet in Peril' franchise, which is produced by the Anderson Cooper 360 program, there is no need for a separate unit."

A source at the network, who asked not to be named, said the move is a strategic and structural business decision to cut staff, unrelated to the current economic downturn. Financially, "CNN is doing very, very well," the source said, and none of the health and medical news staff has been cut. Yet the big question, of course, is whether or not the reorganization will decrease the overall amount of CNN's science, technology, and environment coverage. CNN says no, but it's hard to imagine that it won't—Anderson Cooper or not, fewer people is fewer people.

What's more, the decision to eliminate the positions seems particularly misguided at a time when world events would seem to warrant *expanding* science and environmental staff.

"It's disheartening," said Christy George, who is president of the Society of Environmental Journalists and has worked closely there with Peter Dykstra, CNN's outgoing executive producer for science and technology. "For the last year or two, television has, in general, been making a commitment to beefing up its environmental coverage." In particular, clean energy has moved to center stage in our global political and economic discourse, and President-elect Barack Obama recently

reaffirmed his commitment to tackling climate change.

"There is going to be a lot to cover in science, technology, and environment," George pointed out, "and it's not going to be enough to just cover the politics of it to keep people informed."

Indeed, others who know the CNN science staff agree that the network is making a bad decision. "I'm baffled," said Keith Cowing, who runs [NASAWatch.com](http://NASAWatch.com) and has been a friend of CNN's Miles O'Brien for years. Cowing has appeared on air with O'Brien a number of times.

"Miles is a reporter's reporter. In terms of the [scientific] research, it's him. He walks in—and this is why he's so good—and just knows it. To me, there's an economy there where you don't have to have a bunch of young researchers running

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**CNN is not the only television network that has been slashing science jobs.**

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around. You've got the guy who can say, 'Got it,' and go right on air."

While CNN credited O'Brien as being a "terrific reporter," Cowing added that he is surprised the network doesn't care to hold on to that expertise.

For his part, O'Brien is putting on a positive face. "In television news, a nearly 17-year stint at one shop is more than just a good run—it is an epoch. I can honestly say I have loved every minute of my time at CNN," he said in a prepared statement. "It has been my privilege to be surrounded by

the most talented, dedicated, and creative people in the business. Collaborating with them—sharing many great adventures—is what I will miss the most but I leave with great memories and great friendships intact. I see a lot of exciting opportunities—and I look forward to exploring what is on the horizon—which, after all, has been my mission at CNN all these years."

Yet it is exactly "what is on the horizon" at CNN that also makes the decision to eliminate its science staff seem so illogical. On Dec. 1, the *New York Times* published a long article about the network's intention to begin competing in the wire service business against outfits like *The Associated Press*, the world's largest news organization. But how CNN is going to compete on massive stories like energy and climate with no stand-alone science staff is anybody's guess. CNN says that its newswire will be cheaper than the AP's, but newspapers should consider such factors when deciding whom to partner with.

CNN is not the only television network that has been slashing science jobs. *CNN continued on page 29*

## SCIENCE WRITERS RESPOND.....

NASW President Mariette DiChristina, joined CASW President Cristine Russell, Society of Environmental Journalists President Christy George, and World Federation of Science Journalists President Pallab Ghosh in sending a joint letter of protest to CNN Worldwide President Jim Walton and CNN/U.S. President Jon Klein over the dismantling of the CNN science, technology, and environmental unit. A copy of the letter can be found at <http://www.nasw.org/mt-archives/2008/12/nasw-joins-protest-of-cnn-scie.htm#more>.

**Other news stories, commentaries, and blog posts on the topic:**

Deborah Blum  
*The Huffington Post*  
"Why My Dog (and I) No Longer Watch CNN"  
<http://tinyurl.com/62ycl5>

Paul Raeburn  
*Columbia Journalism Review*  
"Weird Science (Reporting)"  
<http://tinyurl.com/5kozdf>

Andrew Revkin  
*New York Times*, Dot Earth blog  
"Science Journalism Implosion, CNN and Beyond"  
<http://tinyurl.com/6584hf>

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CURTIS BRAINARD IS THE EDITOR OF THE OBSERVATORY, COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW'S ONLINE CRITIQUE OF SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT REPORTING.

# A Fond Farewell To Diane McGurgan

BY LELIA GRAHAM

As had been announced, Diane McGurgan leaves NASW in June after 30 years of dedicated service. At a luncheon at the ScienceWriters 2008 meeting, a couple hundred attendees gathered to honor her. The sunny patio of the Crowne Plaza hotel, in Palo Alto, was filled with longtime friends and new members alike in their appreciation of Diane's monumental contributions to our organization. Inside the hotel, friends viewed a slideshow and wrote fond wishes in an overflowing scrapbook.

Former NASW President Joe Palca emceed a humorous and touching roast of "The Voice." Colleagues remarked on Diane's devotion to young members, her honest advice, and her ability to juggle all that was thrown her way. Tom Siegfried gave Diane heartfelt thanks for imploring the National Association of Social Workers to change its initialism. CASW President Cristine Russell told of a six-year phone relationship, ending in her surprise that The Voice was considerably smaller in person.

Dennis Meredith led the crowd with some Diane-like (expletive deleted) cheers.

Diane was presented with "mahvelous" gifts, both in jest and in gratitude. For her golden years: "NASW's Best" golf balls (which she doesn't want to lose in the West Virginia rough) and a camouflaged Jazzercise outfit (perhaps for retrieving stray shots). Mariette DiChristina, joined by Robert Lee Hotz, presented Diane with an elegant silver tray, engraved:

*To Diane McGurgan with Gratitude  
for 30 Years as a  
Mainstay of Science Journalism*

A champagne toast, plenty of cake, and a standing ovation concluded the heartfelt tribute.

Thus, after three decades with NASW, Diane will no longer have to put up with stupid requests, hound us to pay dues, or field calls about social work. We wish her a long and happy retirement. She will, of course, continue as CASW administrative secretary. ■

LELIA GRAHAM ATTENDED SCIENCEWRITERS 2008 AS AN NASW GRADUATE FELLOW. IN MAY, SHE WILL COMPLETE HER MASTER OF SCIENCE IN TECHNICAL AND SCIENTIFIC COMMUNICATION AT JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY IN VIRGINIA.



## Diane McGurgan— *This Is Your Life!*

BY RICK BORCHELT

You know you're at a tribute lunch for someone who has been a mainstay of the organization since the fall of Rome when I represent the youngest of the tribute speakers.

I just have to say that I find the notion of saying embarrassing things and recalling awkward moments about our beloved Diane truly distressing. If I wanted to indulge in this kind of character assassination I'd be working on the McCain campaign.

So instead I want to tell you how Diane found and befriended a young, naïve and innocent PIO and indoctrinated him in the ways of NASW. Sort of like Mrs. Robinson in "The Graduate."

You wouldn't know it to look at me, but I've been a member for a long time. And I ran into a hitch right off the bat and couldn't find a second for my membership. Diane bludgeoned someone to do it (turns out it was Joe Palca). I can only hope he doesn't regret this rash moment—but then again, I doubt it was the last time that Diane made him her tool.

But that's just the kind of NASW executive director Diane has been. And I can't



Part of editor Tom Siegfried's tribute to Diane McGurgan included this personalized cover of *Science News*.





Would fewer members have been delinquent if dues renewal notices bore this stamp?

tell you the number of times—when I launched the NASW mentorship program, for example—that new or student members have had to throw themselves on the mercy of Diane. And that is always a life lesson—first she barks at you for being irresponsible and not having your paperwork in order, and then she sweeps it all aside and is your best friend forever. And then a few years later you get the call that says, “You need to be a second for a new member. Don’t argue, just do it. I’m forging your signature right now.” She’s been the lifeline of so many of us who couldn’t—didn’t have the social skills to figure out how to get involved in NASW in the first place.

But more important to me personally was the close mentorship Diane provided in my career as Gossip Girl for *ScienceWriters*. Those of you who’ve

**...first she barks at you...  
(and then) is your  
best friend forever.**

known me for a while know that my first real communications career was as a funeral-home greeter growing up in the Ozarks, and I can tell you that all the important stuff about being a PIO I learned in that job. Not about dealing with grief and distraught loved ones—although that came in handy when we were changing membership categories at NASW—but in how to frame issues. Framing is all the buzz word in science writing these days, but let me tell you about framing. When the widow walks in, you have the choice of saying “Lucille, he’s at rest now” or “Lucille, he looks really natural” (and try to say with a straight face).

Or the alternative frame: “Honey, look at it this way, he’ll never cheat on you again.”

See, it’s about where the bones are buried. Diane allowed me to recover and re-purpose those lost skills and use them for the good of NASW when Lynne Friedmann suggested I take over the Our Gang column in *ScienceWriters*. Now, everyone who knew me in those early days knows I was unfailingly charitable about my fellow NASWers, never an unkind word or snarky remark, never the witty jab at the expense of my dear, dear colleagues. But Diane helped me get in touch with my inner bitch—and I honed my skills through years of sitting near the McGurgan throne at every NASW sign-in desk learning from the master. And you see today in this presentation the fruits of her training.

Back in the days before Internet and listservs I got enough job changes, life changes, and accolades about Our Gang to fill a full four issues just by hanging around Diane as she greeted us all when we arrived at the annual meeting. And I relive those glory days with Diane regularly in dishing about you all.

So I wanted to honor Diane with a very special gift for her setting me and so many of the rest of us on our true callings in life. In

the depths of prehistory, NASW was located in Greenlawn, N.Y., where Diane and Buddy lived at the time, and I had occasion to visit the Mother Ship from time to time when I was doing consulting at Brookhaven National Lab there. And on one visit, Diane ushered me in past her utility room, where the most amazing shiny purple Jazzercise leotard hung in all its glory for guests to remark on. After making sure it wasn’t Buddy’s, I’ve been searching for a new Jazzercise leotard for Diane that more befits their new WV home. And I found it.

Once the election is over, Sarah Palin has agreed to donate to NASW one of the

items the campaign purchased for her. It’s a gorgeous camo-coloured Jazzercise outfit trimmed in caribou fur. I know Diane will wear it proudly, and think fondly of us as she’s sweatin’ to the oldies in the wilds of West Virginia. ■



(Spread center) A standing ovation for the one and only Diane McGurgan. (Top) Robert Lee Hotz, Diane McGurgan, Mariette DiChristina, and Joe Palca drowned out by audience cheers. (Center) Joe Palca speaking from the heart. (Bottom) Diane acknowledges well-wishers

Born in Baltimore, Md., Dec. 30, 1918; raised in New York City. Edited and wrote for newspapers in junior high through college (Columbia University, BA, 1939; Journalism M.A., 1940). Landed first reporting job at *Bismarck* (N.D.) *Capital*, 1940.

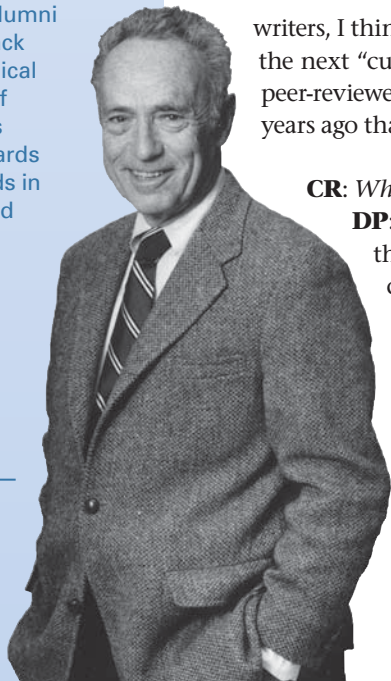
Married Anne Salz, 1941 (former reporter and poet who died in 2002). Three children, three grandchildren. In Army infantry in Europe during WW II. Reported from Paris and NYC, *New York Herald Tribune* (1945-49); European correspondent, *Colliers Magazine* and *New York Post* (1949-51). Started as copyboy for *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1940; came back in 1952 and has been there ever since as reporter, science editor, even a stint as city editor.



## THE PERLMAN FILE

Led NASW (President, 1970-71) and CASW (President, 1976-80). Honored many times over, including: AAAS Science Writing Award, 1976; honorary member, Sigma Xi, 1989; Sustained Achievement Award for Science Writing, American Geophysical Union (AGU), 1997; Columbia Journalism Alumni Award, 2000; Grady-Stack Award, American Chemical Society, 2001; Society of Professional Journalists career achievement awards (1989, 2008). Two awards in his name: the AGU David Perlman Award for Excellence in Science Journalism and the San Francisco Medical Society David Perlman Award for Excellence in Medical Reporting.

For a half-century David Perlman has set the standard by which science writing should be judged.



# David Perlman: On the Record

BY CRISTINE RUSSELL

**D**avid Perlman, award-winning science editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, has been reporting on science and technology for more than 50 years. In addition, he's been a colleague, mentor, and personal hero to legions of NASW members, one of whom is Cristine Russell who recently spoke at length with Perlman about his illustrious career. The following is an edited and condensed version of that conversation. Perlman celebrated his 90th birthday on Dec. 30, 2008.—*Editor*

**CR:** What advice would you give to a young journalist who wanted to cover science today?

**DP:** First of all, learn how to ask questions and how to make people explain the answers. Never be ashamed or afraid to pursue something that you don't understand. And then, come prepared with as much background as you can possibly get. It means reading...I don't know *Mars for Dummies*. Or something that is highly technical if you can. But prepare yourself.

**CR:** How encouraging or discouraging would you be about going into science writing?

**DP:** Well, clearly, the idea that dominated most of my generation was that you wanted to work for newspapers. That is shrinking. I think science writers will be doing more and more in-depth writing for magazines or long scripts on the Internet. But they still have to cope with the reader's unfamiliarity, ignorance, or lack of interest. It's the same old problem of engaging people and making them want to be interested in whatever the science topic is.

**I have no plans to retire.  
I'm going to be found dead  
and leaning against the  
computer screen.**

**CR:** How have things changed?

**DP:** Less money for travel. Fewer and fewer meetings are covered. There was a time when I covered everything from AIDS to zoology and would go to every major medical society meeting. I don't do that anymore. Of course, I don't cover medicine anymore, but our medical reporters don't go to those meetings, either. Science

writers, I think the sophisticated ones, are finally aware that sometimes scientists present the next "cure for cancer" in those meetings, and then the study never appears in the peer-reviewed journals. You remember one of our colleagues [Victor Cohn] said many years ago that medical news stories are all the same—new hope or no hope.

**CR:** What about enterprise stories?

**DP:** Well they're the most fun because by going to somebody's lab, going into the field with somebody, you are able to convey something of how science is done. It is the increase of basic and real knowledge that is so important for people to understand. It's part of our culture. What good is a symphony? What good is an abstract painting? What good is a piece of stem-cell research? Yeah sure, we all hope it will have practical benefit. But the point is that it is a fascinating new way to explore how things work.

CRISTINE RUSSELL IS A FREELANCE WRITER, SENIOR FELLOW AT HARVARD'S BELFER CENTER FOR SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, AND PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE WRITING.



**CR:** How do you find sources, and how much do you use Google, the Internet, and e-mail?

**DP:** All of the above. I talk on the telephone when I have some questions I need to be really clear about. Scientists that are in Berkeley or somewhere nearby, I can always go to their lab and talk to the person. One thing I always want to credit is the PR people at the universities and research institutions all over the country. Because they are the ones who send you a press release about somebody who published in a journal that you never heard of and you otherwise wouldn't have seen.

**CR:** How have relationships with scientists changed?

**DP:** Scientists, to a considerable extent, are more willing to talk to journalists. There has been a lot of talk within the scientific community about their obligation to communicate with the broad public. And the fact that by communicating they get the local support they need on appropriation bills for NIH or NSF or whatever. So I think scientists are far easier to talk to today than they were when I was starting out.

**CR:** How do you avoid being a cheerleader for science or else catering to the critics?

**DP:** I'm probably vulnerable to being termed a cheerleader for science. But that is a little bit like saying the paper's music critic is a cheerleader for music, or the art critic is a cheerleader for art, or the person who runs the book review section is a cheerleader for books, even though many of the reviews might be negative. The process of science is what you're really writing about.

**CR:** When did you decide to be a newspaper reporter?

**DP:** There are two versions of my own recollections. My mother had a friend who was a reporter on the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, and every year he used to give us free tickets to the Ringling Brothers Circus. I must have been about 10 or 11, and I thought that was the most fantastic thing in the world—to be a reporter and get free circus tickets! Then I saw the stage performance of the play "The Front Page." And that was when I knew that I wanted to be a newspaper reporter just like those guys. I must have been about 12 years old.

**CR:** You started as a general assignment reporter at the Chronicle. What turned you into a science writer?

**DP:** I was covering a lot of science stuff indirectly. Water issues, land reclamation issues, offshore oil-drilling issues. We didn't have a fulltime science writer then. In 1957, I broke my leg skiing. I wound up in the hospital, and our kid's pediatrician brought me a book called *The Nature of the Universe*, by Fred Hoyle. He said, 'It's a fascinating book about astronomy.' And I said 'I don't care about astronomy. Why don't you bring me a good detective story?' I read it and thought, 'Geez, that was interesting!' So once I was able to walk around, I decided to go up to the observatory, and I met a guy named George Herbig. I asked him 'what do you do for a living?' and he said, 'Well, I am interested in stars being born in the Orion Nebula.' It really was one of the most romantic images that I'd had in my life. And that kind of intrigued me enough to say to myself, 'Nobody is writing about this stuff. I'll do it.'

**CR:** You also started covering medicine from scratch.

**DP:** I was at a medical meeting, and a pediatrician from Stanford was presenting something brand new about children's digestive

diseases and bilirubin. I didn't really understand what she was talking about. Afterwards, I went up and said 'Dr. Gross, I thought there was something in medical ethics that you didn't talk about your patients. Who is Billy Rubin?' I swear to God that's true. That poor woman fainted or practically did. Then she explained that bilirubin is not a person. I thought I was going to get an interesting story about a kid that had some disease, and she cured it. 'Who is Billy Rubin?' became a joke among a group of our friends.

**CR:** Did you take science in college?

**DP:** I had science survey courses at Columbia that were required. I didn't care anything about them then. But there are a lot of popular science books, and I read quite a few of them, especially in the earlier days. I think if you begin writing science fulltime, you begin to meet or have contact with people in a number of disciplines you can call for help. If somebody really wants to go into science writing, I'd advise: Don't do as I did, but try to take more science in college. You've also got to write, write, write.

**CR:** What reader are you writing for?

**DP:** I'm trying to write for intelligent people who have a reasonable education and curiosity. On some subjects, I know everybody is going to love it. All Mars missions. People are interested in that stuff. But I'm trying to get people interested even if it's not a Mars story. I'm surprised continuously by the questions I get from kids.

**CR:** What makes you excited to get up in the morning?

**DP:** It's going to work, going in the newsroom and finding a story to work on. I have no plans to retire. I'm going to be found dead and leaning against the computer screen. And, I have absolutely no plans to write my memoirs. I can't imagine myself having the patience to write a book.

**CR:** What is the biggest science story on the horizon?

**DP:** I won't live to see it. It would be the discovery of earth-like exoplanets with habitable zones and then the discovery of some kind of life on them—25 years from now at least. Perhaps nearer on the horizon, would be, I hope, the discovery of evidence of past or present life on Mars. ■



David Perlman gets a hug from friend Ashley Wolff during his 90th birthday party, hosted by the *SF Chronicle*.

## DAVE PERLMAN'S "TOP TEN"

1. Most important science story *recombinant DNA*
2. Most over-rated story *International Space Station*
3. Hardest to cover *cosmology*
4. Biggest national story *Apollo 11 moon landing*
5. Biggest hometown story *HIV/AIDS*
6. Favorite field of science *evolution*
7. Favorite science journal *Journal of Human Evolution*
8. Most impressive scientist *David Baltimore*
9. Most articulate scientist *Carl Sagan*
10. Favorite foreign assignment (a tie)  
*Galapagos (1964) and Ethiopia (2005)*

# 2008 NASW Science in Society Award Winners

BY LAURA PETERSEN

**R**eproductive technologies dominated the 2008 NASW Science in Society Journalism Awards, which recognize investigative or interpretive reporting about the sciences and their impact for good and bad.

Winners Liza Mundy (books) and Beth Whitehouse (periodicals) both delved into the dilemmas surrounding reproductive medicine, such as *in vitro* fertilization and prenatal genetic screening; while electronic media winners Stephen Lyons and Llewellyn Smith profiled African-American chemist Percy Julian, whose myriad accomplishments included laying the foundation for the development of the birth control pill.

The winners in each category received or shared a cash prize of \$2,500. This was presented at a reception on Oct. 26 in Palo Alto, Calif., during NASW's annual meeting.

In addition, the judges awarded an honorable mention to Alison Richard and David Malakoff for their year-long radio series "Climate Connections: How People Change Climate, How Climate Changes People," aired on National Public Radio.

## RAISING AWARENESS

Mundy was honored for her eye-opening book *Everything Conceivable: How Assisted Reproduction Is Changing Men and Women and the World* (Knopf), which examined the

LAURA PETERSEN IS A REPORTER FOR THE *SOLANA BEACH SUN*, IN SAN DIEGO, AND WAS A 2008 CASW NEW HORIZONS TRAVELING FELLOW.

impacts *in vitro* fertilization, fertility drugs, and genetic screening have on family formation and dynamics, parenthood, and especially, the children.

A *Washington Post Magazine* reporter, Mundy said the what she found most disturbing in researching the topic was the health impacts fertility drugs have on multiple-birth children. With the use of these drugs, the number of extreme multiple births has increased dramatically, as well as rates of premature birth and infant mortality.

"I hope to make patients and doctors think twice about the use of fertility drugs," Mundy said.

Interviewing families, doctors, and scientists over the course of three years, Mundy unearthed one ethical question after another. For example, when and how to tell a child he is not genetically related to the mother who carried him in her womb, or how to think of embryos and the beginning of human life—questions that have widespread implications in science and society.



Liza Mundy

Mundy said she did not draw conclusions about these issues; rather, she wanted to raise awareness about them and generate empathy for would-be parents who would "move heaven and earth to avail themselves of these technologies." While the women's reproductive movement has focused on a woman's right to not bear children, women seeking assistance to have a family are often vilified, she added.

Mundy said she does not consider herself a science writer, but thoroughly enjoyed the challenge of clearly describing the biological science involved and even spent two weeks in a lab trying her hand at rudimentary cloning.

"I was so honored to be recognized as a science writer because it is one of the forms of writing I respect and enjoy the most," she said.

## AMAZING ACCESS

*Newsday* reporter Beth Whitehouse spent three years with one Long Island family on a unique mission: to create a sibling whose bone marrow could cure their sick daughter.

The result was "The Match," a five-part series that reportedly brought at least one

The journalist's  
comprehensive, online source  
for knowledge-based news.

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judge to tears.

Whitehouse said she stumbled across the story while working on a routine feature about more frivolous uses of prenatal genetic testing. A doctor put her in contact with the Trebing family, who agreed to have Whitehouse along for their journey.

"I couldn't believe they wanted a reporter in the room when [Stacey Trebing was] having embryos placed into her uterus," Whitehouse said. "They wanted to share their story."

Shortly after her birth, in 2002, Katie Trebing was diagnosed with the rare disease Diamond Blackfan Anemia, in which the body fails to produce enough red blood cells. It is curable through a bone marrow transplant from an exact-match sibling who shares an identical section of DNA code. So Stacey and Steve Trebing set out to create that match, their son Christopher, who was born two-and-a-half-years later.

During that time, Whitehouse spent many, many hours with the Trebings, playing "thousands of games of Pretty Pretty Princess and Zingo Bingo" with Katie. She was also there for Stacey's numerous doctor's appointments and procedures, and the morning 18-month-year-old Katie screamed when her hair fell out in clumps into her cereal bowl.

The transplant was successful and Katie is now a healthy seven-year-old. Whitehouse said she was honored to receive the Science in Society Award because along with the touching story, she wanted to highlight the ethical implications of prenatal genetic screening.

"Once you open the door to test for characteristics and diseases, the more you know about, what else can we test for?" she said.

Still, Whitehouse shared her award with her teenage son, Tristan, who she said is the reason she understands why a parent would go to such great lengths to save their child.

## CHEMISTRY DRAMA

The two-hour NOVA docu-drama "Forgotten Genius" chronicles the life of Percy Julian, a groundbreaking African-American chemist. The grandson of Alabama slaves, Julian rose to the highest levels of scientific achievement, overcoming countless obstacles to

# New Categories for Science in Society Awards

by Bob Finn

*The NASW Science in Society Awards committee and the NASW board of directors have chosen a new set of categories for the 2009 awards.*

For the past few years there have been three categories: books, periodicals (including newspapers and magazines), and electronic (including radio, television, and the web). I've chaired or co-chaired the committee for three full cycles now and have noticed a few problems with the periodical and electronic categories. In periodicals it's been difficult for an individual article to compete against a multi-part series, and it's been difficult for a freelancer or a local newspaper to match a national newspaper and all its resources. In the electronic category it's been difficult for anyone to match a slick NOVA show or a yearlong series from NPR.

In addition, and perhaps most significant, our profession is changing, becoming ever more platform independent. One year, for example, a team from the *New York Times* entered a series of articles in the periodicals category and the companion television show and website in the electronic category. In my view the print articles, the television show, and the website were all part of a single work, but there was no way for the writers to enter it as such.

Furthermore, we've never had a way to honor commentary and opinion in science journalism, and I think much work on print editorials and blogs could qualify as *CATEGORIES continued on page 29*

BOB FINN IS AN NASW BOARD MEMBER AND CHAIR OF THE SIS COMMITTEE.

become a world-class scientist, a self-made millionaire, and a civil-rights pioneer.

"Percy Julian was one of those extraordinary characters," said director Llewellyn Smith, who produced the biography with writer Stephen Lyons. "What lured me into the film was the range and breadth of inter-

ests the man had. He saw himself as a scientist, but in part because of the world he had to struggle with to be a scientist, he had to become so many other things."

Julian was well-known in his day, but since his death in 1975, his contributions to the scientific community have faded from memory. Among his most significant achievements was affordable mass production of the pregnancy hormone progesterone, which helped launch the steroid industry and led to the development of cortisone and the birth control pill.

Most film biographies are based on books. In this case,

none had been written, which meant months of primary research that added up to 60 interviews across 12 states. Interviewed were family, friends, and colleagues, many of whom had saved Julian's personal effects as if waiting for this film to be made.

*The winners in each category received or shared a cash prize of \$2,500.*

"Out of the interviews the portrait of Julian emerged," Lyons said. "These people knew Julian, so there's an intimacy in their stories not often seen in a TV biography."

Portrayed in the film by Tony-award-winning actor Ruben Santiago-Hudson, Julian also lent his own words to the narrative through his civil rights speeches and drafts of his autobiography.

"It's a rare opportunity to make a film this special," Lyons said. "All the best lines were his." ■



Beth Whitehouse



Stephen Lyons

**N**ational Public Radio science correspondent Joe Palca was standing in his childhood bedroom in New York City when he learned he had won the 2008 Victor Cohn Prize for Excellence in Medical Reporting. It was only fitting then, he said, to jump up and down like a five-year-old.

The Council for the Advancement of Science Writing (CASW) prize honoring a body of work over five years was the one science award the veteran reporter had yet to clinch.

"I was tickled pink," Palca said, who received the \$3,000 prize at an awards dinner held jointly by CASW and NASW. The award also carries special significance for Palca because it's named in honor of the late *Washington Post* medical writer Victor Cohn, a respected colleague.

Judges selected Palca because he turned complex science reporting into easily accessible human narratives with a powerful impact. His enterprising stories on stem-cell research and the 50th anniversary of the polio vaccine were commended for their fresh perspectives, while pieces on genetic diagnosis and testing and on neglected global diseases such as hookworm were praised for highlighting important issues often overlooked in the media.

Palca "makes medical science come alive," said Deborah Blum, a Pulitzer Prize-winning

# Joe Palca Wins Victor Cohn Award

BY LAURA PETERSEN



Throughout his career, Joe Palca has turned complex science reporting into easily accessible human narratives.

professor at the University of Wisconsin, in her nominating letter. "His work has remained innovative throughout a long career; he combines a gift for storytelling with a strong journalistic talent for thorough reporting."

The judges said they were highly impressed by a series of pieces Palca did in 2006 in which he looked back at stories he reported 10 years earlier to see how then-promising lines of medical research had progressed.

"None had yet come to fruition," Palca said. "The researchers were still plugging away." This did not come as a surprise, he added.

"I did this to say what we're reporting on now, it's almost impossible to say what's going to be important," Palca said. "Today's new direction could be tomorrow's dead end."

With the media focused on today's big discovery, reporters rarely have the opportunity to reflect on the ongoing evolution of scientific research, Palca said.

"The media, they want answers," Palca said. "I hope, in the end, it helps people understand science is not this yes or no, 'this is what it is' event, it's a process."

Personally, Palca said he prefers stories with ambiguity.

"I like quirky things that don't have answers," he said. "It fits with the nature of science."

After earning a doctorate in physiological psychology from the University of California, Santa Cruz, Palca said he discovered he lacked the patience for research. However, he did have an affinity for reporting about it.

"I found communicating science to the public quite intoxicating," Palca said. "It's so much fun; I get to talk to people I only got to read about in graduate school."

Palca began his journalism career in television in 1982. A few years later, he landed a job at *Nature*, where he worked as the Washington news editor for three and a half years. He served in a similar position at *Science* until he joined National Public Radio in 1992. Palca said he stuck with radio because the medium provides a richer experience for the listener.

"With radio you hear more than the words spoken," he said. "You can hear the passion, the intensity, the disappointment, the emotion."

When asked how he "makes stories come alive," Palca discussed the difference between a straight news lede versus something that makes the audience laugh. That may mean being a little offbeat or experimental, he said, but it always means hooking the listener in immediately.

"I try to do it in a way that makes you understand this is worth listening to," Palca said. "I don't want you dare turning away until you've heard what the story is about."

Palca, who served as NASW president from 1999 to 2000, said he is looking forward to the next 10 years of his career, when some of the first stories he reported may finally have had enough time to produce useful results.

"I'd like to see gene therapy actually cure something," Palca said. ■

LAURA PETERSEN IS A REPORTER FOR THE SOLANA BEACH SUN, IN SAN DIEGO, AND WAS A 2008 CASW NEW HORIZONS TRAVELING FELLOW.



# How One Writer Uses Twitter

BY DAVE MOSHER

I won't try and sell you on Twitter, but I'll tell you how it's useful to me as someone who produces a website about space.

I'm following more than 170 people, who update at least once every few hours. I don't have the time to read all of the updates, so I don't. But I do try and pay attention to my feed when I'm taking a mental break, grabbing a snack/lunch, and so on. That being said, here is what I find useful:

**Networking.** Twitter is a decent way to connect with people without being creepy, a sort of pre-e-mail contact method...something between a chat room, a status updater, and a room full of people. Let's say I visit Joe Bob astronomer's blog and his Twitter username is clearly displayed there. He's a great blogger, so I follow him. If I don't have his e-mail, I can use an @joebobastronomer in my tweets to flag his attention or if he beings to follow me, I can send him a direct message.

To extrapolate this example some more, let's say I see him reply to other Twitter users; e.g. @janebobastronomer. Well I'm curious who this "janebobastronomer" character is, so I click over to her page—hey, it's another great blogger I didn't even know existed.

This snowballs over a couple of weeks, and suddenly I find myself integrated into a community of space bloggers, popular science publication editors/writers, private space-flight proponents, NASA co-oppers, etc. I'm not sure how else I could so easily and quickly get the attention of these people without being creepy.

**Content sharing.** I'm a pusher of content, so I want people to have as many ways as possible to find it—and Twitter is great for that. I tweet a teaser line and a link, and hope that someone following me finds it interesting and

re-tweets (which is why you sometimes see "RT" at the beginning of a post), snowballing interest in the article/interview/op-ed/etc. and driving traffic to the site.

It's also easy to share things you find interesting, sort of like a low-tech Stumbleupon (that's a different can of worms, and perhaps more important to me than Twitter—see [www.stumbleupon.com/about](http://www.stumbleupon.com/about)). I find that people usually tweet the most interesting, entertaining, or useful content they seem to find on the web—so it's essential when it comes to staying on top of the best new content on the web.

**Community pulse.** By occasionally checking out what links people are tweeting, I get a very good sense of what people like—and that's very helpful to me for getting ideas. In the shoes of a freelance, I'd think tapping into a subject-driven community would also be useful. You could better stay on top of your beat, helping you pitch the best content ideas to your publisher.

In a nutshell, it's a big tool in my belt to find the best content out there and what people find interesting. Valuable information.

**Personality.** Part of my job description is to be accessible to our audience, and not be a wizard behind the curtain. Yes, Twitter helps prop up egos...embarrassing, but true.

**"Other."** I'm always finding new ways to use Twitter.

To loop back to networking a bit, there are some people out there who are almost wholly inaccessible—except through Twitter. Case in point, the "Mystery Team" that is competing in the Google Lunar X PRIZE. I wanted an interview with them, but they didn't want anyone to know who they were. Solution: I direct messaged them, set up an online chat, and interviewed the team leader. I got a neat interview, and they maintained their incognito status. Sure, I could have gone through GLXP's media relations, but this all happened within the course of three minutes. So Twitter can be an extremely efficient contact method.

Want another "other" example? Recently, I put out a call for students who would like to guest blog for us. Within 10 minutes, I had five e-mails in my inbox.

**The rules.** I've been doing this for a few months now, and I've learned some unspoken rules of Twitter:

**Don't spam.** Some of the SciWri08 people were tweeting so much (i.e. every few minutes) *TWITTER continued on page 29*

## The Great Twitter Experiment

BY NANCY SHUTE

Until recently, I thought that Twitter was just for letting all 17 of your friends know you were heading out for coffee. But a presentation at last year's Online News Association conference convinced me of Twitter's usefulness to find sources, develop networks, and deliver news.

The NASW annual workshop seemed like a great way for science writers to experiment with the year's hottest social networking tool. So, the NASW grad-student travel fellows were asked to cover workshop sessions in Twitter-sized snippets (140 characters max). Cybrarian Russ Clemings set up a feed that channeled the tweets to the NASW website. Other NASW members soon joined in. There were technical glitches, including spam from a San Francisco restaurant site. The experiment also sparked heated debate at the meeting and on the NASW listservs, with some members embracing Twitter's wide-angle stream of consciousness, while others deplored it as random and superficial. Dave Moser's cogent analysis of Twitter's pluses and minuses is presented here.

The Great Twitter Experiment has us thinking of ways to use new technology to provide better coverage of future NASW annual meetings. Low-cost audio or video coverage, slides, PDFs, or some combination of those could be a great way for members to get hands-on experience with new multimedia platforms. It's also a means to strengthen and serve our far-flung community of members who can't or don't attend the meeting. Please send your ideas for improved workshop coverage to me at [nshute@nasw.org](mailto:nshute@nasw.org). ■

NANCY SHUTE IS A SENIOR WRITER AT U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT.

DAVE MOSHER IS WEB PRODUCER AT DISCOVERY.COM.

# New Resource on Communicating Climate Change

## Audio and Video Highlights from Seminar Available

The Knight Center for Specialized Journalism, at the University of Maryland, recently held a seminar titled "Medical Advances: Treatments, Cures, Possibilities." Audio and video highlights are available as downloads from [www.specializedjournalism.org/?q=seminars/2008/medical-advances](http://www.specializedjournalism.org/?q=seminars/2008/medical-advances).

### Topics include:

- Future of Stem Cells:  
Where the Science is Headed
- Aging: How Old Can We Expect to Be?
- All About You: Personal Genomics
- Tackling Childhood Obesity
- Alzheimer's: Reason to Hope?
- Medical Ethics: Doing the Right Thing
- Latest Advances in Cancer Research
- Latest Advances in Obesity
- Clinical Research at NIH and the Undiagnosed Diseases Program
- Toxins in Everyday Life:  
When to Worry...or Not

In addition to accessing multimedia from all of these sessions, the names and contact information for sources and a detailed guide to sources in the field is also available at the same URL. ■

(Source: Knight Center for Specialized Journalism)



The Metcalf Institute for Marine and Environmental Reporting has published *Communicating on Climate Change: An Essential Resource for Journalists, Scientists, and Educators*, written by NASW member Bud Ward. The publication is available as a free pdf from the Metcalf website [www.metcalfinstitute.org/Communicating\\_Climate\\_Change.htm](http://www.metcalfinstitute.org/Communicating_Climate_Change.htm).

The book is an outgrowth of six NSF-funded workshops on the topic that Ward conducted under the auspices of Metcalf, at the University of Rhode Island. The book details dialogs among top climate scientists and journalists on intricacies of communicating on climate science. Among them: Andrew Revkin (*New York Times*), Peter

Dykstra (CNN), Jim Detjen (Knight Center for Environmental Journalism, Michigan State University), Richard Somerville (Scripps Institution of Oceanography), and Stephen Schneider (Stanford University).

There is also a limited number of free print copies available (shipping and handling charges only). An order form can be found on the Metcalf website. ■  
(Source: news release)

## THE Rosalynn Carter Fellowships FOR MENTAL HEALTH JOURNALISM

THE  
CARTER CENTER



The Carter Center in Atlanta, Ga., announces six one-year journalism fellowships of \$10,000 each. Designed to enhance public understanding of mental health issues and combat stigma and

discrimination against people with mental illnesses, the fellowships begin in September 2009. Fellows will not be required to leave their current employment.

The application deadline is April 20, 2009.  
To apply, e-mail:

Rebecca G. Palpant, M.S.  
The Carter Center  
Mental Health Program  
[ccmhp@emory.edu](mailto:ccmhp@emory.edu)  
[www.cartercenter.org/health/mental\\_health/fellowships/index.html](http://www.cartercenter.org/health/mental_health/fellowships/index.html)



"Informed journalists can have a significant impact on public understanding of mental health issues, as they shape debate and trends with the words and pictures they convey."

— Rosalynn Carter

For more information, see [www.cartercenter.org](http://www.cartercenter.org)



# Scholarly Pursuits

BY RICK BORCHELT

At last count, there are several dozen scholarly journals in the U.S. and abroad that publish articles in the area broadly known as “communications.” Some of them—like *Science Communication* and *Public Understanding of Science*—explicitly concern themselves with communicating about science and technology; others, such as *Media, Culture & Society* or *Communication Research*, publish on a wider range of topics. Most of these journals are not familiar to NASW members, yet even the most esoteric of these publications sometimes includes research directly relevant to the workaday world of science writing. With that in mind, in this and in future issues of *ScienceWriters* I’m going to pick a couple of recent academic or technical articles that I think ought to be read and discussed by NASW members, in these pages or on the NASW listserves. And if you read something in the communications literature you think would make a good candidate for this column, send it along to me at [rickb@nasw.org](mailto:rickb@nasw.org).

■ ■ ■

**Nam-Jan Lee, Douglas M. McLeod, and Dhavan V. Shah. 2008. Framing policy debates: issue dualism, journalistic frames, and opinions on controversial policy issues. *Communication Research* 35 (5): 695-718.**

Framing of science and technology has become the new buzzword in science communication, and generally is taken to mean paying attention to the organizing principles or cognitive structures used to explain scientific concepts, especially controversial ones. For example, one of the most obvious policy frames in recent science policy has been setting up global warming in either economic or moral terms. These message frames are believed to inform how individuals make policy or political judgments, and the current message to the research community is to avoid getting caught up in policy debates framed by value or religious judgments and to “re-frame” the discussion along other lines.

Exactly how message frames work to influence decision making, however, is still poorly known. In this paper, University of Wisconsin researchers Lee et al. study how variations in message frames about two controversial policy topics—stem-cell funding and immigration policy—affect how individuals form opinions about the topics. They examine two dominant frames, a values frame (defined as a clash of underlying principles or moral positions)

and a strategy frame (a clash between political interests and strategies) in the context of these two issues. For the stem-cell issue, they exposed study participants to two online surveys, both created from scratch with information that framed the stem-cell debate either as an ethical (values frame) or political (strategy frame) controversy, and measured their opinions and attitudes about stem cell research.

The authors discovered that framing stem-cell research as a political issue caused participants to dismiss the frame almost entirely, a finding reflected in previous research by other scholars where people tended to suppress their reliance on partisanship in making decisions when the issue is presented via a strategy frame. Instead, the participants in this study relied on “backup” moral and values frames anyhow. Take-home message for science communicators: For controversial science, at least, sticking purely to message frames about political and technical framing of scientific issues is likely to be counterproductive; audiences need to be engaged on their own moral and value landscapes.

■ ■ ■

**Einar Thorsen. 2008. Journalistic objectivity redefined? Wikinews and the neutral point of view. *New Media & Society* 10 (6): 935-954.**

A standard water-cooler topic in places where journalism is conducted or studied is the presumed impact of citizen journalism on established, commercial journalistic enterprise. Often, this concern is expressed as a lament for the bygone standards of objectivity in reporting. Einar Thorsen, from the University of Teesside in the U.K., reviewed one of the most common portals for citizen journalism, Wikinews (<http://en.wikinews.org>) to assess how articles were selected for inclusion, document the editorial history and source referencing for the articles, and critique the “neutral point of view” (as opposed to journalistic objectivity) approach to news construction and what it portends for online citizen journalism. At heart is the question: How do Wikinews contributors negotiate its espoused neutral point of view policy, and how does it really differ from the objectivity standard of news journalism?

Thorsen conducted a detailed review of the 2,332 news articles and associated talk pages published on Wikinews between November 2004 and July 2005, the early

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*Exactly how message frames work to influence decision making... is still poorly known.*

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RICK BORCHELT IS DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS FOR THE GENETICS AND PUBLIC POLICY CENTER AT JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY.

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...“balance” in journalism  
and “balance” in Wikinews  
represent different  
approaches to achieving  
neutrality...

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days shortly after launch of Wikinews. The “neutral point of view” philosophy was articulated early by founder Jimmy D. Wales: “The neutral point of view attempts to present ideas and facts in such a fashion that both supporters and opponents can agree. Of course, 100 percent agreement is not possible; there are ideologues in the world who will not concede to any presentation other than a forceful statement of their own point of view. We can only seek a type of writing that is agreeable to essentially rational people who may differ on particular points.” If Wikinews has managed this, it stands in some contrast to the journalistic standard of “balance” that, in science at least, has come under increasing criticism for creating a false sense of conflict and controversy when the scientific community has reached considerable or near-complete consensus

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(as on global warming).

In practice, Wikinews contributors generally made few corrections to posted items that bore on the neutral point of view (NPOV) policy, ranging from removing value-laden words, to deleting entire paragraphs that seemed to reflect a contributor’s point of view, to adding additional material to “balance” the item’s tenor. In striving to post news items without actually replicating existing reporting from other sources, Thorsen found that contributors use a “common sense” or “pragmatic” approach to balance that has developed within the Wikinews community, a “wiki point of view” rather than a neutral point of view per se. This is because the generation of a Wiki point of view for any given story depends, Thorsen found, on active dialogue about that story within the community and among contributors, but Wikinews was only partially successful in cultivating the back-and-forth discussion necessary to yield truly neutral stories—ironically, he says, because the NPOV policy itself may discourage more robust and impassioned discussion.

Take-home message: In practice, “balance” in journalism and “balance” in Wikinews represent different approaches to achieving neutrality, but Wikinews—so far—has its own flaws that prevent this citizen journalism from being truly neutral.



**Peter Vasterman, Otto Scholten, and Nel Ruigrok. 2008. A model for evaluating risk reporting: the case of UMTS and fine particles. *European Journal of Communication* 23 (3): 319-341.**

The media get a real drubbing when it comes to reporting risk. Criticisms range from concern that reporters focus on conflict between actors rather than on whether the risk is significant or scientifically negligible, to framing certain risk issues as socially relevant when in fact they are less prevalent than other major risks with low social salience, to ignoring expert opinion in favor of simplistic “layperson frames” in news coverage. These criticisms and media models are valid, Vasterman and colleagues note, but ignore the fact that journalists work in a social and professional context that must inform their reporting. How, then, the authors ask, can we develop models to evaluate risk reporting that take into account the social context

in which reporters operate?

First, they say, evaluate the coverage as a whole, not *individual news stories*. Then, drawing from a European study of newspaper content analysis and interviews with news actors (reporters, decision makers, and scientists) around the issues of universal mobile telecommunications system base stations (we call them cell phone towers here in the States) and fine particulate matter pollution, Vasterman, et al. propose a new set questions by which to judge the merits of reporting risk:

- 1) Sources: Reportage needs to show a variety of sources, not just the vocal ones.
- 2) Frames: Does one specific frame dominate the entire coverage, or do the media frame different issues differently for different risks?
- 3) Amplification: Do the media ratchet up social anxiety about a given risk by promoting one sensational frame or giving voice mainly to those who support that frame?
- 4) Risk perception: Do the media consciously articulate or account for how lay persons perceive risk, and do they explicitly compare these perceptions with scientific risk assessments?
- 5) Scientific data: Do the media acknowledge the probabilistic nature of science, or do they present data as definitive answers?
- 6) Language: Are the media sufficiently careful in their use of value-laden words in connection with certain words (like “radiation” or “cancer cluster”) or images?

Using this set of questions to analyze their own reporting, the authors say, reporters can do a reality check on their own work to determine if they have in fact reported risk in a balanced way. “The evaluation model offers concrete starting points for the reporter who has to cover these issues,” they write. ■

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*The media get a  
real drubbing when it  
comes to reporting risk.*

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# IRS Often Blue-Pencils Write-Offs

BY JULIAN BLOCK

**T**he IRS allows authors, artists, and other creative types to write-off losses suffered in ventures entered into to make “profits,” but not losses incurred in pursuing “hobbies.” Consequently, IRS computers bounce returns that show full-time salaries and other sources of income offset by losses from sideline undertakings that turn out to be hobbies—writing, photography, and painting, to cite just some of the activities that are likely to draw the agency’s attention.

How do IRS examiners determine whether authors intend to realize business profits or just want to have fun? There are no all-purpose guidelines. The answer depends upon the particular circumstances.

Consider, for example, legal secretary Fannie Hawkins, who had 43 of her poems published in a 56-page book *Within the Heart of a Woman*. The Los Angeles writer agreed to pay \$3,000 for publication by Vantage Press, one of those “vanity” outfits that publish at the author’s expense, which is the reverse of the usual publisher-pays-author arrangement. The contract called for Fannie to receive \$1.98 for each of the first 4,000 sales of the book, which was no *Bridges of Madison County*. Vantage sold only 400 at \$4.95 each. Her \$3,000 write-off was blue-penciled by the IRS, which asserted that the activity was all for fun, not profit.

...the IRS asserted that the activity was all for fun, not profit.

Fannie’s track record worked against her. *Within the Heart* was her first published literary work. Previously, she had never appeared even in literary magazines (though she had written for community magazines) or ever received any income from the sale of her writings. Fannie decided to have the dispute resolved by the United States Tax Court, which is entirely independent of the IRS.

At the trial in 1979, she acted as her own attorney. The court ruled in favor of the IRS. It cited Fannie’s failure to offer any evidence to show how much income was generated by sales of her book, authoritative literary opinion on the book’s merit, “possible plans for future publications,” or “some intent or effort on her part to engage in and continue in the writing field with substantial regularity and with the purpose of producing income and a livelihood.” The court concluded it was unable to “distinguish her from someone who writes for a hobby and pays to have the book published for reasons of personal satisfaction” rather than profit.

Another aspiring author was Maurice Dreicer, an American living in the Canary Islands on substantial income from a family trust. His desire to become wealthy and famous as a globe-girdling

gourmet and “multimedia personality” inspired him to write *My 27-Year Search for the Perfect Steak—Still Looking*. As Maurice later explained to the Tax Court, he had to “keep his research up to date,” a Sisyphean chore that required him to travel to some of the world’s best hotels and eateries.

Maurice completed his manuscript, but made only two efforts—both unsuccessful—to get it published. Meanwhile, the big spender’s write-offs for 20 years of what he characterized as research totaled \$500,000 (nowadays, they would be substantially more)—mainly travel and food for himself and Brigitte Kimmich, his traveling secretary. His writing income was south of \$16,000. No slouch when it came to gaming the system, Maurice claimed deductions of about \$25,000 a year of losses from his sybaritic sorties as an offset to his trust income of roughly \$100,000 a year. While the trust-fund playboy wined and dined at five-star restaurants, less affluent tourists thumbed through *Europe On \$5 A Day*.

Eventually, the IRS got around to denying losses totaling \$50,000 for two of those years. The epicure took the dispute to the Tax Court, where he received his just desserts in 1982. The court focused on his lack of expertise and success and his trust income. It ruled that the bon vivant had no realistic possibility of ever earning enough income to offset the large losses from prior years. He enjoyed his life of travel and did not have an honest objective of making a profit. ■

JULIAN BLOCK, AN ATTORNEY IN LARCHMONT, N.Y., HAS BEEN CITED AS “AN ACCOMPLISHED WRITER ON TAXES” (WALL STREET JOURNAL). HIS BOOKS INCLUDE *TAX TIPS FOR WRITERS, PHOTOGRAPHERS, ARTISTS*, AVAILABLE AT [WWW.JULIANBLOCKTAXEXPERT.COM](http://WWW.JULIANBLOCKTAXEXPERT.COM). COPYRIGHT 2009 JULIAN BLOCK. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



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# Science Writers 08 NASW Workshops RECAP

## It's All Geek to Me: Writing about Technology

BY KATHARINE GAMMON

From the blogosphere to Silicon Valley and back, technology impacts both the way we write and the topics we can cover as science writers. In a session called “Geeks, Freaks, and Deadlines: Writing about Technology and the Humans Who Love It” panelists advised, admonished, and cajoled the science writing audience to be creative in their use of technology—as both topic and medium.

The session began with comments from Tom Abate, technology reporter at the *San Francisco Chronicle* and writer of the popular “Tech Chronicles” blog. Abate recommends journalists writing about technology think about commenting on what happens rather than just telling. “Extra, extra—read all about it is dead,” Abate said. “Stick a fork in it. We have to be the people in the world who give context.”

Abate gave examples of how writers can approach stories with an eye for context and meaning. In writing about technology, there is a myth that people do their best work young—like Mark Zuckerberg who started Facebook as a Harvard undergraduate, or Sergey Brin and Larry Page at Google. Playing with this stereotype can be interesting. Abate also told the audience to think about new ways to present information. He recently created an infographic to put the cost of the \$700 billion economic bailout in perspective. “The challenge is to take huge concepts,” he advises, “and make them into pie charts.”

Annalee Newitz, editor-in-chief of the science-meets-science fiction blog io9 (<http://io9.com>) from Gawker Media, told the audience that she had been writing about technology long before she was aware of it. “I have a weird job I didn’t even know existed 10 years ago,” she said.

Newitz sees what she does—writing about the culture of technology—as something slightly different from traditional science writing. While traditional science writing is focused on published research, technology is a broader base. “Technology writing can be a lot of different things, because technology pervades our lives.” Stories that involve technology can also be stories about business, culture, crime, or even parenting. Though io9 is a blog, Newitz says there are only minimal differences in the approach to journalism

on the web—where sites like Gawker are paid by advertisers depending on the number of page views. “Online writing does involve interaction, so you are concerned about what people think.”

Adam Rogers, senior editor of *Wired* magazine, edits features about technology, and has seen the market for these stories change from a time when *Wired* was one of the only places publishing long-form stories about technology—and that opens up tech writing to many new writers. “There’s a fear that tech stories require some special knowledge,” said Rogers. “But I don’t think that’s true. We’re looking for good stories with conflict, characters, and a tale about human beings in their world.” A good place to start might be looking at the personal stories behind inventions—and the inventions behind personal stories.

In closing, Annalee Newitz predicted the future of journalism. “If you’re not writing on the web now, you will be in the future,” she said. “All that being a blogger means is that you’re using blogging software. Don’t worry, it’s very different from the girl down the street who writes about her cat.” ■

## Thinking Outside the Lab

BY WENDY LYONS SUNSHINE

Physics can help NASCAR fans understand why their favorite racecar driver lost. Carbon-dating can help history buffs unearth forgeries. According to panelists on the “What’s Science Got to Do With It? Thinking Outside the Lab” session it takes only a fresh eye to find applications of science in activities such as these and other everyday happenings.

Showing science at work outside the lab allows writers to take science out of its ivory tower and make it meaningful for a wider audience, said a group of journalists led by K.C. Cole, journalist, author and professor in the Annenberg School of Journalism, at the University of Southern California. By digging deeply into the scientific dimension of ordinary activities and common questions, the panelists said, writers can make new discoveries, educate non-scientists, and broaden their writing opportunities.

Cole warned against “hardening of the categories”—the thinking that science belongs only on the pages of *Scientific American*. People who see the workings of science and nature everywhere can guide others to notice and understand what is right under their noses. It’s a strategy Cole used when writing about entropy for the *New York Times* “Hers” column and for the *Los Angeles Times* by discussing what the discovery of the quark revealed about the O.J. Simpson trial. Cross-fertilization between disciplines also fuels Cole’s participation in cross-disciplinary workshops publicized at <http://www.categoricallynot.com>.

English major-turned science writer Jennifer Ouellette had an “epiphany about her geekdom” during a drive past a construction site, when she felt compelled to point out the self-organized criticality of an enormous pile of crumbling sand. Her penchant for noticing science everywhere led to her book *The Physics of the Buffyverse*, which explores the physical science of the popular television show “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.” She also blogs about science in the commonplace for Cocktail Party Physics (<http://twistedphysics.typepad.com/>) and Twisted Physics, [KATHARINE GAMMON IS A FREELANCER BASED IN SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA WHO WRITES ABOUT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR WIRED, ABCNEWS.COM, AND TOM’S GUIDE.](http://blogs.</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

WENDY LYONS SUNSHINE ([WWW.WLSUNSHINE.COM](http://WWW.WLSUNSHINE.COM)) IS A TEXAS-BASED FREELANCER WHO WRITES FOR AUDUBON, ONEARTH, SIERRA, PLANNING, D(ALLAS) CEO, WORTH, AARP THE MAGAZINE, AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS.



discovery.com/twisted\_physics/) which is part of Discovery Channel. Her next book, *Dangerous Curves*, will address the underlying mathematical concepts behind playing craps in Las Vegas and other ordinary activities. With newspapers increasingly killing sections featuring basic science stories, finding fresh angles for a broader audience is a survival strategy, says Ouellette.

For Paul Preuss, a science-fiction novelist who is now a science writer for the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, an ordinary household item factored into one of his most successful press releases: "How duct tape will do anything except seal ducts." Preuss' passion for history and archaeology fueled his interest in carbon dating, neutron activation analysis, and other scientific technologies. The key, he said, is finding "a new way of looking at things."

Diandra Leslie-Pelecky, a professor of physics at University of Texas at Dallas, focused her expertise on the vastly popular sport of stockcar racing in her book, *The Physics of NASCAR: How to Make Steel + Gas + Rubber = Speed*. While the top-eight glossy science magazines have 17 million readers per month, Leslie-Pelecky notes that there are 75 million NASCAR fans in this country. She wants to serve more than the narrow scientific community and found venturing into stockcar racing to be a mind-opening anthropological excursion. "If you rely on things that have already been discovered, you're missing an opportunity to learn some big things," Leslie-Pelecky said. "Take a chance and go out and do something you'd never do, talk to people who do other things, and find out what's interesting about them."

When Adam Frank, professor of astrophysics at the University of Rochester, wrote his book *The Constant Fire: Beyond the Science vs. Religion Debate*, he wanted a new, more personal way to think about spirituality and to move beyond the debate of "evolution vs. scripture." To Frank, science reveals the sacred. "Microscopic pictures, equations and all types of science can be this extraordinary gateway to awe, not an antagonist to it," he said.

The panel agreed that to freshen your science writing, take a walk or go to a social place, and sharpen your observational skills. Look closely, and you'll discover tangible examples of abstract scientific theories. ■

## KIDS WRITING MADE EASY

Freelancer Emily Sohn, also a session panelist, offers these specific writing tips, based on her seven years of experience with kids writing, most recently for *Science News for Kids* (<http://sciencenewsforkids.org>):

- Keep words short, sentences short, and paragraphs short.
- Appeal to the senses, especially in your lede. Find something about your topic that kids can picture, smell, taste, hear, or touch.
- Don't try to do too much. Stick to just one or two main ideas.
- Some guiding principles: Science is new. Science is everywhere. Science is fun. Science is adventure.
- You can make yourself a character in your story. Kids like having someone to identify with.
- Don't overuse exclamation points!

FIND EMILY AT [HTTP://TIDEPOOLSINC.COM](http://tidepoolsinc.com). TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PITCHING *SCIENCE NEWS FOR KIDS*, E-MAIL EMILY AT [EMILY@TIDEPOOLSINC.COM](mailto:EMILY@TIDEPOOLSINC.COM) OR JANET RALOFF AT [JAR@SCIENCENEWS.ORG](mailto:JAR@SCIENCENEWS.ORG).

# Science Writing for Kids

BY EMILY SOHN

Science writing for kids is a diverse field, teeming with opportunities for freelancers. That was the theme of "Science Writing for Kids: Skills and Markets." A panel of editors of science publications aimed at young people offered advice on pitching to their publications, as well as general advice on writing for this audience.

Patricia Janes is executive editor for two classroom magazines published by Scholastic and subscribed to by teachers. *Science World* (<http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/classmags/scienceworld.htm>) is written at a 7th/8th grade level for kids in grades 6 through 10. There are six news stories and four features in each issue. Pitches are welcome, but most stories are generated in-house and assigned to staff writers and freelancers. Janes would, however, love pitches for the 350-word "Gross Out" column, which explains the science behind a disgusting picture (which must be located first), and for a column called "I Want THAT Job!," which explains a fun science career. Great art is important.

*SuperScience* (<http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/classmags/superscience.htm>) is written at a 4th/5th grade reading level for grades 3 through 6. Each issue has four news stories, two feature articles, and a "SuperScience Mystery"—an eight-character play that is designed to be read aloud. Janes would love to hear from writers interested in writing these plays.

Both magazines pay \$1/word. Writers start with news items to learn the magazine's voice, before moving up to features. Interested in writing for *Science World*? E-mail Patricia Janes at [pjanes@scholastic.com](mailto:pjanes@scholastic.com). For *SuperScience* inquiries, contact Elizabeth Carney at [ecarney@scholastic.com](mailto:ecarney@scholastic.com).

Catherine Hughes, science editor for *National Geographic KIDS* (<http://kids.nationalgeographic.com>), said the magazine targets 6-14 year olds and is written at about a 10-year-old reading level. The magazine, which Hughes says is "entertainment-driven," comes out 10 times a year and has a circulation of 1.5 million. Feature stories must have a tight focus, include pop-up facts, sidebars, charts and lots of great visuals. Anecdotes about animals are popular.

Hughes welcomes pitches, though most of the magazine's stories are assigned, so don't spend too much time on your queries. If she sees a flair in your letter, she might just assign you something. Writers get 2-3 weeks to finish an assignment. Payment is \$1/word, upon acceptance. Contact her at [chughes@ngs.org](mailto:chughes@ngs.org).

WORKSHOPS continued on page 29

EMILY SOHN IS A MINNEAPOLIS-BASED FREELANCE JOURNALIST WHO WRITES FOR KIDS AND GROWN-UPS. HER STORIES HAVE APPEARED IN *BACKPACKER*, *EATING WELL*, *HEALTH*, *LOS ANGELES TIMES*, *SCIENCE NEWS*, *SCIENCE NEWS FOR KIDS*, *U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT*, AND MORE. SHE HAS ALSO WRITTEN A HANDFUL OF BOOKS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.



# BOOKS

BY AND FOR MEMBERS



Ruth Winter  
44 Holly Drive, Short Hills, NJ 07078  
or e-mail [ruthwrite@aol.com](mailto:ruthwrite@aol.com)

## Send material about new books

Include the name of the publicist and appropriate contact information, as well as how you prefer members get in touch with you.

***Righting The Mother Tongue: From Olde English to Email, the Tangled Story of English Spelling***  
by David Wolman (NASW), published by Smithsonian Books



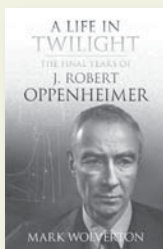
Oregon freelance Wolman—a confessed weak speller himself—takes us on a journey into the past origins of the language and looks at the future of English as influenced by the digital age. *Renaissance, millennium, diarrhea, camaraderies, feign, labyrinth, misspelling*—are you able to spell them without a mistake? [Right now, this columnist is dealing with the harmonization or harmonisation of the European's effort to list ingredients in food and cosmetics. Flavour and colour are the "English" choices.] Wolman says for centuries English spelling has frustrated and infuriated. Compared to the writing system of languages such as German, Spanish or Italian, English spelling is a mess. After a spelling-themed road trip starting with the monks of King Alfred's Wessex, Wolman has produced a book of history, pop culture, and humor that explores how English spelling came to be, traces efforts to mend the code, and imagines the shape of tomorrow's words. ■ *The press representative is Larry Hughes 212-207-7110; [Larry.Hughes@harpercollins.com](mailto:Larry.Hughes@harpercollins.com). Wolman can be reached through his web page [www.david-wolman.com](http://www.david-wolman.com).*

***Sex and War: How Biology Explains Warfare and Terrorism and Offers a Path to a Safer World***  
by Malcolm Potts and Thomas Hayden (NASW), published by Ben Bella Books



Potts, an obstetrician and USC research scientist, and San Francisco freelance Hayden examine the biological origins of organized violence, tracing its development from ancient raids and battles to modern warfare and terrorism. Potts and Hayden relay that understanding war as part of humanity's biological nature provides our best chance to make conflicts less likely and less brutal." Most people...still think of moral sentiments and religious convictions as transcendental things that come from outside of us. Potts and Hayden write even the most modern warfare has its roots in our biological history, stemming from a behavior called team aggression—or the tendency of males to band together and intentionally kill their own species. "Team aggression and killing members of an out-group was a relatively low-risk way for the males who evolved the behavior to increase their access to territory and resources," Potts and Hayden explain, "and those who exhibited this behavior were more likely to pass on their genes to succeeding generations than those who did not." ■ *Hayden can be reached at [thos.hayden@gmail.com](mailto:thos.hayden@gmail.com). The press representative for the book is Adrienne Lang at 214-750-3600; [adrienne@benbellabooks.com](mailto:adrienne@benbellabooks.com).*

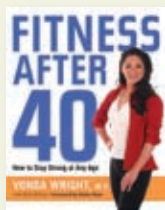
***A Life in Twilight: The Final Years of J. Robert Oppenheimer***  
by Mark Wolverton (NASW), published by St. Martin's Press



Philadelphia freelance Wolverton has written about the least-known and most enigmatic period of J. Robert Oppenheimer's life, from the public humiliation he endured after the 1954 Atomic Energy Commission's investigation into his alleged communist leanings and connections, to his death in 1967. It is a portrait of a man who was toppled from the highest echelons of politics and society, saw his honor and name blackened, but succeeded in maintaining his dignity and rebuilding a shattered life. Previously unpublished FBI files round out the picture and cast a sinister cloud over Oppenheimer's final years. The book is an exploration, not only of a prominent scientist and philosopher, but also of an unforgettable era in American history. Anthony Lewis, author of *Gideon's Trumpet*, says of *A Life in Twilight*: "We need reminding of the price this country paid for the hounding of a great man: not just for the paranoia and vindictiveness of scoundrels like J. Edgar Hoover and Lewis Strauss, Oppenheimer's chief persecutors, but for the way others—from President Eisenhower down—allowed the disaster to happen." ■ *Wolverton can be reached at [extermw@earthlink.net](mailto:extermw@earthlink.net). The press representative is Rachel Ekstrom at 646-307-5563; [rachel.ekstrom@stmartins.com](mailto:rachel.ekstrom@stmartins.com).*



***Fitness After 40: How to Stay Strong at Any Age* by Vonda Wright, M.D., and Ruth Winter (NASW) with foreword by Nolan Ryan, published by AMACOM**



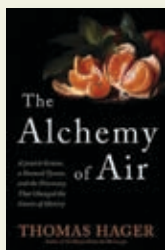
Dr. Wright, an orthopedist, has created a medical program specifically designed to target the fitness and performance needs of mature athletes. “No matter how fit we may have been at 20, we’re very different people after 40. You have to understand your body and approach exercise and injury in a new way,” according to Wright. “The good news is that not only can we retain the vigor of our youth, we can actually perform as well, if not better.” Wright practices at the University of Pittsburgh’s Center for Sports Medicine. She’s also the team physician for the Pittsburgh Steelers. Freelance writer Winter became co-author after receiving a cold call from Wright about the book project. ■ *The press representative for the book is Irene Majuk at 212-903-8087; [imajuk@amanet.org](mailto:imajuk@amanet.org).*

***Explore Within an Egyptian Mummy* by Lorraine Jean Hopping, published by Silver Dolphin**



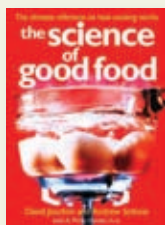
Mummies are certainly tempting to touch, but that’s not permitted in the museums where they’re usually found. Hopping’s interactive book not only allows but encourages young readers to touch—and learn all about—an Egyptian mummy. They learn how Egyptians buried and entombed their dead including the making of burial masks, giving amulets for an underworld journey, wrapping mummies from head to toe, preserving the body, and placing sacred organs in canopic jars. Hopping says: “Coming from the board-game business, I’m moth-like attracted to the concept of a toy-and-book combination product, and so...I gladly tackled...the history and science of mummies. One big upside to this format is instantly attracting both very young and older reluctant readers and holding their attention with cool plastic parts—a mummy model that reveals itself page by page.” ■ *The press contact is Betsy Pringle at 425-827-7120; [betsyp@beckermayer.com](mailto:betsyp@beckermayer.com). Contact Hopping through her website [www.hoppingfun.com](http://www.hoppingfun.com).*

***The Alchemy of Air: A Jewish Genius, a Doomed Tycoon, and the Scientific Discovery That Fed the World but Fueled the Rise of Hitler* by Thomas Hager, published by Harmony Books**



Fixed nitrogen is essential in agriculture. Its rarity, as science writer Hager writes, shaped the world and its politics. Hager details that in 1905 German chemist Fritz Haber discovered a process for transforming abundant air-borne nitrogen into ammonia, and Carl Bosch’s engineering scaled Haber’s benchtop chemistry into industrial processes to make fertilizer. Haber and Bosch earned Nobel Prizes and saved millions from starvation. By 1944, the Haber-Bosch factory at Leuna—a primary target for U.S. bombers—occupied three square miles and employed 35,000 workers. Hager not only illuminates the men’s complex work, but also digs into their personal lives. Haber, a Jew, developed the chlorine gas used in World War I, sought a way to extract gold from the oceans to pay off German war reparations, and conducted research that led to the development of the Zyklon B gas used in Nazi death camps. Bosch asked Hitler to spare Jewish scientists for the sake of German chemistry and physics. The Fuhrer replied: “Then we’ll just have to work 100 years without physics and chemistry.” ■ *The press representative is Ava Kavyani 212-782-9486; [akavyani@randomhouse.com](mailto:akavyani@randomhouse.com).*

***The Science of Good Food: The Ultimate Reference On How Cooking Works* by David Joachim and Andrew Schloss with A. Philip Handel, published by Robert Rose Inc.**



This book contains more than 1,600 A to Z entries from acid to wine. While demystifying the complexities of cooking, it describes the confounding phenomena of everyday eating such as why artichokes make certain foods taste sweeter and what causes some people to think cilantro tastes like soap. Topics on cooking ingredients discuss the basic molecular make-up of meats, poultry, game, fish, and other foodstuffs, as well as how these foods react to heat. The authors include chemistry principles that reveal the physical and chemical transformations that take place during cooking, explaining things like aeration, caramelization, and gelatinization. ■ *The press representative is Trina Kaye at [TrinaKaye@tkopr.com](mailto:TrinaKaye@tkopr.com).*



**NASW President**  
**Mariette DiChristina**  
*Scientific American* and  
*Scientific American Mind*  
 MDICHRISTINA@SCIAM.COM

## President's Letter

**YOU MAY BE WONDERING, AS I HAVE, JUST WHAT AN EDITOR IS DOING AS THE LATEST PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCIENCE WRITERS. HAVEN'T MY ILK DONE ENOUGH TO CAST A PALL OVER THE LIVES OF OUR INK-STAINED COLLEAGUES WITHOUT MEDDLING WITH THE HAVEN THAT IS THE WORLD'S LARGEST ORGANIZATION DEVOTED TO SCIENCE WRITERS?**

In all seriousness, a benefit of having an editor around is that we are exquisitely attuned to satisfying the needs of our audience. In fact, editors succeed or get fired based on that ability at our various institutions, publications, and media outlets. Now I am personally adding a new audience in NASW's 2,800 full and student members. Making things more interesting, NASW members have diverse professional needs and concerns, making our collective career goals very broad. At the same time, science writing in general is under enormous pressures and changing rapidly.

As I take the reins, I am keen to learn more about what you all need to survive and thrive in practicing our craft in today's challenging world and how the organization can assist. What should NASW do for your \$75 per year?

In the past few years, NASW has had some notable successes, I'm pleased to say. For example, the annual meeting has developed into a rewarding set of NASW workshops held in conjunction with several days of science briefings, lab tours, and field trips arranged by the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing. Our initiative with the Authors Coalition has provided money for many travel fellowships for writers who could not attend meetings otherwise. Committed volunteers put together the invaluable Words' Worth rates database, which documents pay rates for various gigs, and the Grievance Committee has successfully gone to bat for members who are owed fees.

Recently the board came to realize that it needed to look ahead in a much more focused way to strategically shepherd the future of NASW. It happened like this:

Last spring, my predecessor, Robert Lee Hotz, began a board-list discussion about the role of the board of directors. A thoughtful and passionate series of missives ensued. People made many suggestions about various tasks that the board could

take on. Then-board member Curt Suplee posed an important question: "What, exactly, are the genuinely important goals that NASW, though its board, is actively seeking to fulfill?" In other words, what should the vision of NASW's future be? Without a vision in place, it's all too easy to become consumed by peripheral matters.

As a first step in determining that direction, part of the October board meeting focused on our mission as encapsulated in the NASW constitution:

**Section 2. PURPOSE OF ORGANIZATION.** This organization shall foster the dissemination of accurate information regarding science and technology through all media normally devoted to informing the public; and shall foster the interpretation of science and its meaning to society in keeping with the highest standards of journalism. In addition, this organization shall foster and promote the professional interests of science writers.

The officers and board of directors brainstormed ways to fulfill that statement. I take full blame for the mock-worthy Dilbert-like corporate strategy we used, but I have actually found this method helpful. We wrote the three key points from Section 2 atop large sheets of paper and tacked those to the walls. Then we filled those pages with sticky notes full of neat ideas in service to those goals.

As the newly elected board takes its seats in 2009, it will further add to those ideas and develop a plan of action based on top priorities, practicality for a volunteer organization, and available funding. Along the way, we will surely need your feedback, suggestions, and support. Stay tuned. ■



**Cybrarian**  
**Russell Clemmings**  
*Fresno Bee*  
 CYBRARIAN@NASW.ORG  
 OR RCLEMMINGS@GMAIL.COM

## Cyberbeat

**IT WAS WHILE BROWSING THE NEW MONTY PYTHON CHANNEL ON YOUTUBE THAT YOUR HUMBLE CYBRARIAN DECIDED TO DEVOTE THIS ISSUE'S COLUMN TO SPAM. (IT WAS EITHER THAT OR DEAD PARROTS.)**

By far the biggest time sink in running the **NASW.org** server is the spam battle. Our Internet provider, Servint, provides some helpful tools, but they need continual tweaks as spammers shift tactics.



How big is the problem? Here are some numbers to think about. In the past week, our server received 276,801 messages. Of those, 212,643—three out of four—were rejected, mostly because they were identified as spam.

At present, we use basically two lines of defense, neither of which is foolproof. First, all incoming mail to **NASW.org** addresses (including the e-mail aliases available to any NASW member) is checked against the **zen.spamhaus.org** and **rbl.spamcop.net** blacklists.

These lists are among the better efforts to identify rogue mail servers that send out the worst of the worst spam—the Viagra ads with misspelled words; the phony bank login requests. They aren't intended to block ordinary press releases, even if some people consider them spam, too.

Any mail that comes to us from a server on either of those lists is automatically rejected, with an explanation to the sender. That gives the sender a chance to find and fix the problem, which is most likely preventing them from sending mail to most if not all Internet addresses. You can read more about blacklists and their uses at **www.dnsbl.com**.

The second major defense we use is a spam filtering software package called SpamAssassin. Unlike the blacklists, which reject all mail from spam-spewing servers even before taking receipt, SpamAssassin processes the mail after we've received it, then assigns it a score based on the probability of it being spam.

The scoring system uses hundreds of tests. You can see the list at **spamassassin.apache.org** (click on "tests"). Some are technical in nature. Others are based on content. For example, a subject line with the words "weight loss" is worth one point. "Replica watch" is worth about 3.5 points.

Any message with a total score higher than 10 points is bounced to the sender with an explanation. Message with scores between 5 and 10 points are accepted, but the string (SPAM?) is added to the subject line. In those cases, you can examine the message headers to see how the score was computed, if you're curious. Check your e-mail software documentation to learn how to see the headers.

Because mail to **NASW.org** aliases is simply forwarded, rather than being sent to individual mailboxes on our server, it's unfortunately not possible to turn SpamAssassin on or off or tweak its

## Dispatches FROM THE Director



Tinsley Davis  
Executive Director  
DIRECTOR@NASW.ORG



### NASW Moves West

The NASW office has moved westward. With Diane's transition to a life free from wayward social workers mistaking us for the "other NASW" and the reclaiming of her dining room from office space, NASW's home office is now based in Berkeley, Calif. Effective immediately:

National Association of Science Writers  
P.O. Box 7905  
Berkeley, CA 94707  
510-647-9500

If you live in the Bay Area, do get in touch. As a new transplant from Boston, I'm looking forward to exploring the local science writing scene.

Manage your  
membership records  
online at **nasw.org**

### Not Sure if Your Dues are Current?

*You can now check your dues status on **nasw.org** by going to "Check Your Member Data." Speaking of dues, NASW operates on a calendar year which means that no matter when you join or renew, whether you're a student or a regular member, all mem-*

*berships expire on January 1. If you haven't yet paid for 2009, January 31 was the last day to avoid a late penalty of \$20. Unpaid and/or late dues really throw off the organization's cash flow and accounting. We've reluctantly instituted the late/reinstatement fee to try and alleviate the problem.*

### Saving \$\$ and Paper

I like the feel of a newspaper or book in my hand as much as the next writer, but over the past year have been working on ways to cut down NASW's paper usage. In October, online balloting for the NASW board saved 2,500 sheets of paper and 5,000 delivery and return envelopes. There was great feedback about the system's ease of use and a 14 percent increase in the response rate! The move also saved printing and postage costs and emboldened me to move forward with plans for online renewals this year. Thanks to Russ for putting in countless hours to devise the process and its link to the database. The process will continue to be refined for next year. ■

## INVITATION TO JOURNALISTS

# Learn from Leading Researchers About Aging and Health



**WHAT** Workshop for journalists on health research in aging  
**WHERE** Toronto, Ontario, CANADA  
**WHO** Canadian Institutes of Health Research  
**WHEN** Thursday and Friday, March 5 and 6, 2009

Print, broadcast and web journalists are invited to meet top Canadian health researchers and learn about the latest research on staying healthy into old age.

This seminar-style workshop will cover the causes and prevention of age-related conditions, their treatment, as well as the type of health services and support systems that will be required to meet the needs of seniors.

*This free workshop is open to journalists from around the world.*

**For more information or to register  
contact CIHR Media Relations:  
1-613-941-4563 or  
mediarelations@cihr-irsc.gc.ca**



The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) is the Government of Canada's agency for health research. CIHR's mission is to create new scientific knowledge and to catalyze its translation into improved health, more effective health services and products, and a strengthened Canadian health-care system. Composed of 13 Institutes, CIHR provides leadership and support to nearly 12,000 health researchers and trainees across Canada.

**www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca**

settings for individual users. But if you find out that mail to you is wrongly rejected as spam, send the details (preferably including a copy of the rejected mail with complete headers—see above) to [cybrarian@nasw.org](mailto:cybrarian@nasw.org) for further investigation.

## NASW-TALK

Author Michael Crichton's death in November set off a discussion of idiomatic expressions (among other things).

Prompted by a report that Crichton had been "battling cancer," Princeton, N.J., freelancer Michael Lemonick asked, "Why is it that we always refer to people 'battling' cancer? I never hear the phrase 'battling heart disease' or 'battling malaria' or 'battling emphysema.' Just curious about how this way of speaking about cancer became ubiquitous."

Tongue-in-cheek (one hopes), Mechanicsville, Va., freelancer David Lawrence quickly replied, "Wow, that's one of the questions I used to only be able to come up with when stoned. It's a good question, but it just calls to mind a time that I only vaguely remember."

Other offered thoughts that were considerably less entertaining but more responsive to the question.

"I think it's because we view cancer as a foreign entity within us; our own cells gone awry. We are battling against something that is no longer ourselves," wrote Mystic, Ct., writer Sheryl Torr-Brown.

"I would suggest that it has fallen into cliché usage simply because the phrase is a basic metaphor for what it is like to be treated for a disease that is difficult and personally trying, but not impossible to cure," said University of North Carolina-Charlotte science writer James Hathaway.

"My problem is with the word (battle) itself," said Indiana University media relations specialist David M. Bricker. "Hey, health writers! Some new active verbs, please, and preferably ones that do not invoke war or sports."

Some suggestions from Hathaway: "Negotiating cancer (I guess today it would have to be a bipartisan negotiation), quarreling with cancer, quibbling with cancer, practicing cancer diplomacy, imposing trade sanctions on cancer, etc."

Tanya Kucak offered: "Living with cancer. Dealing with cancer. Healing from cancer. Harder than it seems—you want something stronger than 'tolerating' or 'coexisting' and certainly 'negotiating' is the wrong idea."

To read more, search the NASW-talk archives for "CNN reports that Michael Crichton has died" and "battling disease."

## NASW-FREELANCE

It's a common problem for reporters of all stripes. What do you say when a source insists on being your editor? Minneapolis independent journalist Maryn McKenna asked for advice in September when her usual defenses failed.

"I ran into an outlier, a medical researcher who insisted that he should have the right to review the whole story and to give input into how it is phrased. I ran through all my usual explanations and offerings and made no dent at all," she wrote.

"When a scientist asks you to be able to review text before publication, what do you offer and what conditions do you set? And if any of you have been pressed to offer full review, what do you say beyond 'No?'"

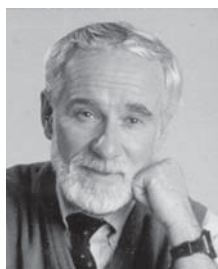


David Lawrence of Mechanicsville, Va. took a hard line: "Ask him if he will return the favor on his research. He will say no, then ask him why he should expect a different answer from you. You are the writer, not him. If you've already interviewed him, though, he's screwed. Write the story. Offer him a chance to comment, but file the story as you think best and tell him if he has any problems afterward that he can talk to your editor—who I hope will back you up."

Port Angeles, Wash., freelancer Stephen Hart placed the decision-making burden on the editor.

"I don't send or read even sections of an article or quotes to sources," he said. "However, many of my pieces have been reviewed by sources. That's because some of editors I've written for send the piece out. That's appropriate for press releases, for some pieces that border on being press releases, for meeting reports, etc. I just tell interviewees that whether or not they can review a piece is up to the editor not to me."

Read more by searching the NASW-freelance archives for the thread "Help me explain why we don't have peer review." ■



**James Cornell**  
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## News from Afar

### THE YANKS ARE COMING...SEND THE WORD ...THAT THE YANKS ARE COMING...OVER THERE.

Over there is London, of course, where the sixth World Conference of Science Journalists (WCSJ) will be held June 30 to July 2, 2009.

And, while I'm not quite as chauvinistic as George M. Cohan to think our expeditionary force will dominate, the anticipated number of Yank presenters, producers, and participants at that meeting suggests U.S. science writers and NASW have finally and fully embraced international conferences.

It wasn't always so. U.S. involvement in the "conference concept" was rather slow in coming, but, once committed, NASW made major contributions to its success.

Some history. Arthur Bourne, a British science writer, world-traveler, and occasional consultant to the UN, had tried for nearly two decades to organize an international conference of science journalists with particularly focus on emerging nations in Africa and Asia.

Finally, in 1990, Bourne, then president of the European Union of Science Journalists' Associations (EUSJA), persuaded UNESCO to sponsor the first world conference in Tokyo. With generous assistance from Japanese business and philanthropic groups, some 50 science journalists from 35 countries met with approximately 100 of their Japanese colleagues in November 1992.

Although five of the six American participants at this conference—Sharon Dunwoody, Fred Golden, Howard Lewis,

Vic McElheney, and myself—were NASW members, we were seen more as representatives of the International Science Writers Association (ISWA), which had been instrumental in bringing journalists from the developing world to Japan.

Despite the great success of the Tokyo meeting, its declaration of the need for a world association, and continued efforts by Bourne and others to organize a follow-up, a second conference wouldn't be realized for another seven years. Held in Budapest in July 1999, that conference reflected the impact of new technologies on science journalism as well as the changes in European society following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc.

Again, U.S. participation was sparse, but, in one way, very significant. NASW president Joe Palca joined representatives of several other national organizations in signing the Declaration of Budapest: A set of eight recommendations for UNESCO aimed at improving the state (and status) of science journalism worldwide. A key recommendation was the formation of a world federation of national and regional associations that could, among other things, convene international conferences on a regular basis.

The next milestone in the conference chronicles also involved NASW. In 2001, Japanese foreign member Kenji Makino organized an international mini-meeting on science and technology reporting in Tokyo. Unfortunately, the meeting came little more than a month after 9/11. Many registrants opted out, but among those who did attend were Jim Detjen and NASW president Paul Raeburn, who joined in another call for a world federation.

The third world conference took place a year later in Brazil. Although the only U.S. participants this time were Detjen and myself, it was clear that the support of two successive NASW presidents helped lead to the formal announcement of a World Federation of Science Journalists (WFSJ), with a slate of officers and a draft constitution presented for approval at the next conference, in Montreal in 2004.

Both NASW president Deborah Blum and incoming president Laura van Dam felt strongly that NASW should be looking beyond its borders, and at the Montreal conference they jointly announced that NASW would join the new federation. It is widely thought that the U.S. decision influenced several other national associations to join ranks.

In April 2007, the fifth world conference took place in

## UPCOMING MEETINGS

**June 30-July 3, 2009 • Sixth World Conference of Science Journalists (WCSJ2010)**, Westminster, London, UK. [www.wcsj2009.org](http://www.wcsj2009.org)

**July 2-7, 2010 • EuroScience Open Forum (ESOF2010)**, Turin, Italy. [www.esof2010.org](http://www.esof2010.org)

**Dec. 6-10, 2010 • 11th International Conference on the Public Communication of Science and Technology (PCST2010)**, New Delhi, India. [www.pcst-2010.org](http://www.pcst-2010.org)

**July 12-16, 2012 • Fifth EuroScience Open Forum (WSOF)**, Dublin, Ireland.

Melbourne, Australia. By then WFSJ was a well-established entity, with some two dozen member organizations, a sustaining budget, and outreach and mentoring projects for reporters in the developing world. NASW, too, had a significant presence at that conference, with an impressive contingent of members participating and Deb Blum serving as the association's liaison with the WFSJ and as a principal player in the partnership between NASW and the fledgling Arab Science Journalists Association (ASJA).

Sadly, Laura van Dam did not live to see her vision of NASW internationalism realized. In her honor, the Laura van Dam Travel Fellowships were established and sent three young members to the Australia meeting. The same fellowship program will enable a few NASW members to attend WCSJ 09 in London.

Among the Yanks participating in WCSJ 09 will be Christine Russell producing a session on climate change, Robert Lee Hotz will chair a session on the future of science reporting that includes panelists John Rennie of *Scientific American*, Phil Hiltz of the MIT Knight Fellowship program is organizing a session and workshop on new media, UK-based John Travis of *Science* is also involved in session planning, and Deborah Blum will be there in her role as a WFSJ officer. In fairness to all North Americans, I should note that several Canadian colleagues are on the program, including NASW members Peter Calamai and Jean-Marc Fleury, who is also WFSJ executive secretary.

For details on registration, accommodations, and the development program, visit [www.wcsj2009.org](http://www.wcsj2009.org).



Looking for academic opportunities abroad? The European Commission has recently updated and re-issued its European Guide to Science Journalism Training, a listing of courses in science journalism across the 27 EU member states, as well as exchange programs, scholarships, and other initiatives supporting science journalism. [http://ec.europa.eu/research/conferences/2007/bcn2007/guide\\_to\\_science\\_journalism\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/research/conferences/2007/bcn2007/guide_to_science_journalism_en.pdf)



Congratulations to Wilson da Silva, Australian member of NASW and editor of *COSMOS*, the popular science magazine that has now won 27 awards in less than four years. His journal won Best Analytical Writing, Sustainability in Publishing, and a Highly Commended for Best Single Article in the 2008 Bell Awards for Publishing Excellence competition. Its sister title *G Magazine*, won another four awards.

The inaugural Sustainability in Publishing award went to the magazines' parent company, Luna Media, for efforts to reduce its environmental impact, among them using 100 percent recycled paper in its magazines, offering free parking to staff who cycle to work, running two worm farms, and conducting a carbon audit and offsetting its emissions—thus becoming the first publisher in Australia to go carbon neutral. ■



**Pam Frost Gorder**  
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of Research Communications  
Ohio State University  
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## Our Gang

**Robert Nellis is in a groove.** He was recently named assistant professor in the adjunct programs at St. Mary's University of Minnesota, and is now senior communications consultant at the Mayo Clinic. The word "senior," he points out, is not necessarily a reflection on advancing age. Write him at [bobnellis@nasw.org](mailto:bobnellis@nasw.org).

**American Scientist is changing its lineup.** **Fenella Saunders** has been promoted to senior editor. **Cathy Clabby**, formerly of the *Raleigh News & Observer*, has joined as associate editor. Fenella reports that the magazine will soon round out the staff with a new managing editor and another associate editor. "It's been hectic, but it's an exciting time, and we're looking forward to doing good things!" she says. Congratulate Saunders at [fjsr@nasw.org](mailto:fjsr@nasw.org) and Clabby at [cclabby@amsci.org](mailto:cclabby@amsci.org).

**Four part harmony—on a world stage.** In October, NASW members **Deborah Blum**, **Craig Duff**, **Jeanne Lenzer**, and **Kevin Begos** were speakers at the first regional meeting of the Arab Science Journalists Association (see *SW* "News From Afar," fall 2008). Blum won the prize for the best scientific paper presented, and Begos won the award for best English-language coverage of Arab science. All four writers sang over dinner with a group of Arab science journalists who, Blums reports, could seriously carry a tune. Send song requests and dedications to [dblum@wisc.edu](mailto:dblum@wisc.edu), [craig\\_duff@timeinc.com](mailto:craig_duff@timeinc.com), [jeanne.lenzer@gmail.com](mailto:jeanne.lenzer@gmail.com), and [kbegos@nasw.org](mailto:kbegos@nasw.org).

**She speaks for the band.** **Susan Steeves** has been named media relations manager at Virginia Tech. She left Purdue University, where she was senior science writer and media relations officer for seven years. Ask her for a backstage pass at [ssteeves@vt.edu](mailto:ssteeves@vt.edu).

**Jon Weiner will rock on** as director of media relations at Caltech. He leaves the University of Southern California's Health Sciences Campus, where he was executive director of public relations and marketing. Send cheers to [jrweiner@caltech.edu](mailto:jrweiner@caltech.edu).

**Mary Parlange is going solo.** She left her job as science writer at Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne, but will stay on in Switzerland as a freelancer. Wish her well at [mary.parlange@gmail.com](mailto:mary.parlange@gmail.com).

**Elizabeth Whittington has a new hit single.** The assistant managing editor of *CURE* magazine won the Excellence in Women's Health Research Journalism Award from the Society for Women's Health Research for her article "A New Era." The story examined how researchers are combining new and old therapies to treat breast cancer. Congratulate her at [elizabethhw@curetoday.com](mailto:elizabethhw@curetoday.com).

**He's cutting a new record deal.** **Steve Tally's** second book of popular history, *Almost America*, has been optioned for

a possible cable television series of the same title by Larkin-Goldstein Productions. Write him at [tally@purdue.edu](mailto:tally@purdue.edu) and ask what it's like to pen a crossover hit.

**Lee J. Siegel has hit the top of the charts** in Utah, where he won the 2008 Governor's Medal for Science and Technology for "outstanding achievements and contributions in science and technology with significant impact to the state." He is part of the University of Utah public relations team that won two Golden Spike Awards for its coverage of the 2007 Nobel Prize in Medicine or Physiology won by geneticist Mario Capecchi. Those awards were given by the local chapters of the Public Relations Society of America and International Association of Business Communicators. Ask for his autograph at [leesiegel@comcast.net](mailto:leesiegel@comcast.net).

**Best blog, pop category.** **Alan Boyle**, [msnbc.com](http://msnbc.com) science editor, is among the recipients of the 2008 Communication Awards from the National Academy of Sciences. Boyle won in the Online/Internet category for selected works from COSMIC LOG and his "pioneering efforts to bring daily coverage of the physical sciences, technological innovation and space sciences to broad new audiences on a popular news website." The award carries a cash prize of \$20,000. Write him at [alan.boyle@msnbc.com](mailto:alan.boyle@msnbc.com) to settle the question once and for all: did he really name his blog after an old Zappa tune?

**She's rocking the vote.** **Jenna McGuire**, who began 2008 as a science writing intern in Ohio State University's Research Communications unit, ended the year as a full-time temporary employee—until, that is, she took a new writing job with the Ohio Department of Development. She will now be working for the lieutenant governor. Her former boss, Earle Holland, quipped, "Apparently, the extent she worked for apolitical me did, in no way, harm to her chances for that job." Don't be surprised to see her byline on a freelance piece or two in the future. In the meantime, congratulate her at [osualum08@yahoo.com](mailto:osualum08@yahoo.com). ■



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## Regional Groups

### CHICAGO

The Chicago Science Writers group gathered on Dec. 4 on the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) to experience cutting-edge virtual reality. The group learned about the developing technology at UIC's Electronic Visualization Laboratory. Researchers from the engineering school explained the system they developed to allow scientists to display large amounts of data on a scalable screen, to show for, for example, details of star photographs from the Hubble or MRI images of an Egyptian mummy. The display allows both fantastic opportunities for educating the public and a way for scientists to share

large data sets across distances.

The writers tried their hands at some of the lab's equipment, learning, for instance, how hands-on desktop display technology can help people map neighborhoods to pick up detailed information on buildings for emergency workers. They also used a headset that immersed them in a 3-D representation of Crater Lake, allowing them to "fly" through the topology. The writers viewed an innovation developed by the lab—the geo wall—that brings 3-D images inexpensively into classrooms throughout the country. Using polarized glasses, science writers were able to see images that could be tilted to allow people to visualize the depth of the sources of geo-instability that lead to earthquakes. These 3-D representations can be used to take students on virtual field trips of everything from rock formations to a visit to summer camp.

### NEW YORK

SWINY members have had several chances to get together this autumn, both face-to-face and virtually. The group had two socials at Stitch, a midtown Manhattan pub. Also an inspiring and well-attended gathering took place at the headquarters of TalkingScience ([www.talkingscience.org](http://www.talkingscience.org)), in which a professional freelancer (Alan Brown) and a staff writer (Apoorva Mandavilli) discussed skills needed to succeed in each of those science-writing career paths. Moving into the virtual world, SWINY now has a group presence on both LinkedIn and Facebook. ■



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# Sarah Palin and the 2008 Ig Nobel Prizes

BY MARC ABRAHAM

**E**very year brings unexpected challenges to organizing the Ig Nobel Prize ceremony. This year brought, among other curiosities and with but little advance notice, Sarah Palin.

The 18th First Annual Ig Nobel Prize Ceremony had long been scheduled for Thursday night, Oct. 2, 2008. Not entirely to our delight, the Obama and McCain campaign managers chose that same night to hold the one and only debate between the two major candidates for the Vice Presidency of the United States.

People (a fair number of them reporters) asked would we move our ceremony to another night? No.

Would we at least shift the start time? No; probably no need. The Ig Nobel Ceremony would start at 7:30 p.m. and if we managed it well, end by 9 o'clock.

The Sarah Palin/Joe Biden debate would begin at 9:00 p.m. Both would be webcast. This was shaping up to be a perfect double bill of absurd, real events that make people laugh and then make them think.

Would Sarah Palin be awarded an Ig Nobel Prize? No. The Igs honor achievements that first make people laugh, then make them think. This year's 10 new winners had already been chosen before Governor Palin entered the national and international arena.

Given Governor Palin's extraordinary and rather Iggy hold on the planet's imagination, were we going to do "something" to at least acknowledge her existence and that of the debate? Well, we decided, yes, we had better do something.

We arranged to have someone who looked very like Governor Palin be onstage during the entire Ig Nobel ceremony. This person would need only to be Palinesque. She wouldn't say anything of substance. She would simply exude.

Verena Wieloch, our former stage manager, has enough of a resemblance and sufficient acting skills to play the role. We bought Verena a hank of fake hair (for about \$5) and a plastic headband, applied a glue gun, and voila, we had someone who at least appeared to be qualified to become the nation's next vice president.



"Sarah Palin" (aka Verena Wieloch) makes ready her entrance.

Verena ascended the stage together with all the Ig Nobel Prize winners, Nobel laureates, and other assorted other dignitaries. She carried a book (*History of the World in the 20th Century*) and a sense of self. We seated her way off to one side of the stage. She continually shook hands and smiled and chattered at everyone. She tried to insert herself into many of the ceremonial moments, but did not actually take part in any of them. She was booed when she first appeared and generally ignored after that.

Verena reports that "after the show, walking back to my car, I stopped by a glass-windowed bar that was showing the debates.

Everyone was glued to the TV. No one turned around!"

Our Governor P. had no discernable affect on attendance, or got but sparse mention in the national and international press coverage of the event (which in all other ways continues to grow.)

P.S. Other than the Palin questions, our biggest scramble was in replacing our spotlight operator, a wonderfully skilled woman. A week before the ceremony, we learned that she would not be coming. Why? Because she had entered a nunnery. ■

MARC ABRAHAM IS EDITOR OF THE ANNALS OF IMPROBABLE RESEARCH, AND FOUNDER AND MAIN ORGANIZER OF THE IG NOBEL PRIZE CEREMONY.

## In Memoriam

### Bernice Z. Schacter

Researcher turned medical writer

**B**ernice Zeldin Schacter died on Sept. 21, 2008, after a lengthy fight against multiple sclerosis. She was 65. An NASW member since 2000, Schacter lived in Wilmington, Del.

Schacter was a researcher turned medical writer who completed her undergraduate studies at Bryn Mawr College and earned a Ph.D. in biology from Brandeis University. After postdoctoral work at the Lawrence Radiation Lab (UC Berkeley) and the University of Miami, she held faculty positions at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Wesleyan University, University of Delaware, and Case Western University School of Medicine. An immunology researcher, she did research with such diverse groups as the Amish in Ohio and small communities living on the Nile. Later, she became associate director of immunology for Bristol Myers Squibb leaving to become vice president of research at BioTransplant in 1991.

In 1994, Schacter became a freelance biomedical consultant and writer. As a book author, she wrote *Issues and Dilemmas in Biotechnology: A Reference Guide*, *Biotechnology and Your Health* (with a foreword by Nobel laureate Kary Mullis), and *The New Medicines: How Drugs Are Made, Approved, Marketed, and Sold*.

She married Lee Philip Schacter, M.D., in 1967. After being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1991, she used her unique perspective as a scientist, patient, and writer to bring to others information on new therapies. ■

(Source: web obituary and publishing houses)

## IG NOBEL OPPORTUNITIES

The 2008 Ig Nobel Prize winners are listed at [improbable.com/ig/winners](http://improbable.com/ig/winners).

Video of the ceremony, including glimpses of the faux Governor Palin, is at [improbable.com/ig/2008/webcast](http://improbable.com/ig/2008/webcast).

Several of the winners will speak at the Improbable Research session at the AAAS Annual Meeting in Chicago, on Friday night, March 13, at 8:00 p.m. in the Fairmont Hotel's Moulin Rouge Room.



John Carey, senior correspondent in *BusinessWeek's* Washington bureau, has covered science, technology, medicine, health, and the environment for the publication since 1989.

## John Carey Receives AAAS Science Journalism Award

**N**ASW member John Carey of *BusinessWeek* has won the 2008 AAAS Science Journalism Award (magazine category) from the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

Carey wrote a thought-provoking, carefully documented piece looking at the question of whether the benefits of statin drugs may be overstated except in the case of high-risk heart patients. The Jan. 28, 2008 story ("Do Cholesterol Drugs Do Any Good?") looked at the statistical methods used in research on statins, including the little-known but useful statistic called the "number needed to treat," or NNT. Carey also discussed the design of clinical trials aimed at proving the benefit of heart drugs and the underlying biochemistry of statins.

Guy Gugliotta, a freelance science writer, called the story "informative, brightly written and a most welcome destruction of the conventional wisdom." Spotts said it was a "clear public service in highlighting the shortcomings of drug trials for cholesterol drugs."

Carey will receive \$3,000 and a plaque at the 2009 AAAS Annual Meeting in Chicago, in February. Other award recipients will be honored in print, broadcast, online, and children's science news categories. Independent panels of science journalists chose the winners of the awards, which are sponsored by Johnson & Johnson Pharmaceutical Research & Development, L.L.C.

"These are not the best of times for either science journalism or newsmagazines," said Carey. "Amid the gloom, winning the award is a big shot in the arm for me—and a validation that what we do still has value." ■

(Source: AAAS news release)

## Richard Robinson Named McGurgan Award Recipient

**C**ongratulations to Richard Robinson, this year's recipient of the Diane McGurgan Service Award. Richard, chair of NASW's actively engaged freelance committee, embodies the enthusiasm and spirit of the McGurgan Award. A member since 1996, Richard has contributed steadfastly to the listserve, shepherded the development of the Words' Worth compensation database, and lobbied tirelessly on behalf of his fellow freelancers.

The award was established in 2001 when NASW member Louis Lerner, who passed away in 2006, wished to show appreciation for Executive Director Diane McGurgan and other members whose efforts on behalf of NASW go beyond the call of duty. He sent in a check for \$2,500 and left it up to the NASW board to decide how best to administer the money. At Diane's suggestion, an annual service award with a cash prize of \$500 was created. After the initial funds were disbursed, the board voted to continue funding the awards at the same \$500 annual level. ■



Richard Robinson is a freelance science writer from Sherborn, Mass. and is chair of the NASW freelance committee.

## NASW Election Results

**A** total of 639 electronic ballots were cast in the recent NASW board election and the results are in.

Leading the 2009-2010 NASW board are President Mariette DiChristina, *Scientific American*; Vice President Nancy Shute, *U.S. News & World Report*; Treasurer Peggy Girshman, *Kaiser Health News*; and Secretary Ron Winslow, the *Wall Street Journal*.

Returning board members are Beryl Benderly, freelance; Kelli Whitlock Burton, freelance; Glennda Chui, symmetry; Terry Devitt, University of Wisconsin-Madison/The Why Files; Bob Finn, International Medical News Group; Robin Marantz Henig, freelance; Tom Paulson, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*; and Tammy Powledge, freelance.

New to the board are Dan Ferber, freelance; Vikki Valentine, *NPR Online*; and Mitch Waldrop, *Nature*.

Congratulations! ■



The ScienceWriters 08 NASW Workshops were once again followed by the CASW New Horizons in Science Briefing. (left) CASW President Cristine Russell and NASW President Robert Lee Hotz. (center) Robin Marantz Henig and Nancy Shute huddle with Victor Cohn Award winner Joe Palca. (right) Retiring NASW Executive Director Diane McGurgan.

## NASW Annual Membership Meeting

*The membership meeting was convened on Oct. 25, 2008, as part of the NASW workshop, in Palo Alto, Calif. Approximately 80 people attended. President Robert Lee Hotz called the meeting to order at 8:50 a.m. and reminded everyone that the information being discussed—and more—is available on the NASW website. He praised complete transparency in communication and requested that members recommend to officers and the board additional ways to achieve this goal.*

Treasurer Nancy Shute presented the budget (published in *ScienceWriters* Fall 2008 and online) and reported that thanks to the excellent stewardship of Diane McGurgan and Tinsley Davis, NASW is on a “steady course.” Courtesy of funds from the Authors Coalition (AC), expanded services are being offered to members, including travel fellowships to the annual meeting and the AAAS meeting. As part of the ongoing transition to a new executive director, bank accounts are being moved from West Virginia to California.

Q: *In the recent financial troubles, did we lose anything?*

A: Only from one account; relatively small slice. But, we’re likely to take a hit in our future share of AC funds due to the rising value of the U.S. dollar and cutbacks around the world.

Q: *How much have we received from the Authors Coalition?*

A: We anticipated getting \$60,000, but actually received \$120,000. The “conundrum” is how to spend it in a timely fashion, in keeping with AC guidelines.

Hotz introduced Beryl Benderly, board member and the “Goddess” of AC funds, who modestly responded to the extended applause and compliments by saying “the concept of free money was a no-brainer,” adding that the AC process is “mysterious and unpredictable” and that we can’t use it to commit to ongoing expenses (no recurring expenses, no salaries), it must be used to directly benefit writers.

Cybrarian Russ Clemings discussed website infrastructure changes, including moving to a new server, which costs less and gives more control and flexibility to initiate things ourselves—i.e., starting a

wiki. Regarding new content, an extensive self-publishing section, courtesy of Dennis Meredith, has been posted. Clemings noted that the Palo Alto conference was being “twittered,” thanks to the organization of volunteers and student fellows by Nancy Shute.

Vice president and workshop organizer Mariette DiChristina reported that we set a record for workshop volunteers this year: 27 people “powered by the engine of our own creativity.” She acknowledged the impressive work of Tinsley Davis in making the workshops happen and urged people to fill out the post-workshop surveys, available online this year. The workshops included 32 speakers, 240 members, 50 students, eight student volunteers.

DiChristina then discussed the need to make a minor but important change in the NASW constitution. Moving the annual meeting to October means the new board, taking office in January, won’t meet until 10 months later. She proposed holding elections in the summer so that the board could meet soon after. Language of the proposed amendment reads:

The executive board will set the timing of the biennial NASW elections within six months of the annual meeting, with timely notification of the members thereafter.

[After the meeting concluded, the proposal received more than the requisite number of signatures needed to be put to a member vote, within the next few months.]

Bob Finn, chair of the Science in Society Awards committee, reported almost 200 entries in three categories. He praised the 15 volunteer judges and put out the call for volunteers for next year.



He noted that "we're talking about making some changes to categories" (see page 7).

Jeff Grabmeier reported on the education committee and praised co-chair Rob Irion. The major part of the committee's work takes place at AAAS, and this year set records with 39 mentor/mentee pairs as well as 16 recruiters and 59 students at the internship fair. Grabmeier noted that the past three years AAAS funded 10 students to attend the meeting and that NASW will continue the funding for the next few years, courtesy of AC funds. He also said that website materials for science-writing teachers will soon be updated.

Nancy Shute talked about another use of the AC funds: day-long multi-media training workshops for members in several locations around the country. Shute, Peggy Girshman, Tammy Powledge, Adam Rogers, and Tom Paulson comprise the committee setting these up for a spring 2009 launch. Member ideas are welcome.

All board candidates had been invited to attend the annual meeting. Candidates in the audience stood up and introduced themselves. Hotz announced that NASW is moving away from paper ballots and will elect the board via the web.

As part of a new arrangement, NASW and CASW will have representatives attend each other's annual business/board meetings. New Horizons Program Director Paul Raeburn noted that CASW and NASW have been more engaged in planning the meetings together an effort that streamlined sign-up, registration, and name tags at this year's meetings. Next year's meetings will be in Austin, Tex.

Hotz spoke on behalf of Deborah Blum, NASW's international liaison, who was in Morocco attending the Arab Science Journalists Association meeting.

## NEW BUSINESS

Rick Borchelt urged NASW members to suggest nominees for election as fellows of the AAAS, an honor bestowed "for meritorious efforts to advance science or its applications." Most scientists consider election as an AAAS fellow a matter of considerable prestige. It was noted that fellowship status "gives you a lot of 'pop' in the scientific community" and helps scientists understand that science writers are on equal footing with them.

Incoming president Mariette DiChristina honored Robert Lee Hotz, whose service as NASW president spanned more than three years, because he first stepped into the role during predecessor Laura van Dam's illness and untimely death. Hotz told fellow officers, the board, and those gathered, "Thank you for the opportunity you've given me to work with all of you." There was a standing ovation.

Hotz announced that Diane McGurgan Service Award this year was awarded to Richard Robinson, chair of the freelance committee (see page 25).

The meeting adjourned at 9:45 a.m. ■



Minutes submitted by  
NASW Secretary  
Peggy Girshman  
Kaiser Health News  
PGIRSHMAN@MSN.ORG



## 6<sup>TH</sup> WORLD CONFERENCE OF SCIENCE JOURNALISTS

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**CANADA:** Elie Dolgin, freelance, Vancouver; Siobhan Roberts, freelance, Toronto. ■

\*Student member

# CNN

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According to the *Washington Post*, "NBC Universal made the first of potentially several rounds of staffing cuts at The Weather Channel, axing the entire staff of the 'Forecast Earth' environmental program during the middle of NBC's 'Green Week,' as well as several on-camera meteorologists." Gannett has eliminated roughly 1,800 jobs this week at newspapers around the country, though it's unclear which beats have been most affected. And *Aviation Week and Space Technology* magazine recently nixed its bureau in Cape Canaveral, Fla., where NASA launches its rockets and shuttles. Cowing, at NASAWatch, says that he is simply shocked "that at a time when science and technology should be on everybody's lips, this expertise is suddenly not in demand."

George, at the Society of Environmental Journalists, noted that she has "seen this before" at CNN and that she hopes it will rebuild. Indeed, when the network canceled a weekly science program in 2001, an article in the *Environment Writer* newsletter reported that, "It looks like the end of the road for what was left of CNN's once-heralded environment unit."

So is this the end all over again? Perhaps not. The energy and environment beat, in particular, will likely continue to gain importance and relevance as the 21st century unfolds. Yet one can't help but feel dismayed by CNN's decision or that this industry, at least for the time being, is sadly deteriorating. ■

(Source: Columbia Journalism Review, Dec. 4, 2008.)

## CATEGORIES

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"investigative or interpretive reporting about the sciences and their impact for good and bad," the main awards criterion.

After much discussion, we've settled on a new scheme with four awards.

- Book Category (unchanged)
- Commentary and Opinion
- Science Reporting
- Local Science Reporting

Except for the book category, the awards will be platform independent.

In the commentary and opinion category, blogs will compete against print or broadcast editorials. Entrants will be permitted to submit up to three individual pieces.

In the science reporting category, magazines and newspaper articles will compete against radio pieces, television shows, and multimedia websites, or combinations of the above. To level the playing field between single pieces and multi-part series, entrants will be permitted to submit up to three individual pieces (on separate or related topics) or a single series.

The local science reporting category will honor reporting specifically on local or regional issues. As in the Science Reporting category, entrants will be permitted to submit up to three individual pieces (on separate or related topics) or a single series.

If we find that the new scheme doesn't work, we're prepared to change it again a year from now. If you have major objections to the new scheme, I hope you'll get in touch with me or participate in a discussion on nasw-talk. But I also hope you'll keep an open mind for a year to see how this works.

I thank the ad-hoc committee we assembled to

discuss possible changes to the awards. That committee included Beryl Benderly, Dennis Meredith, Joe Palca, and Dawn Stover. In addition, the NASW board, particularly Glennda Chui, contributed many thoughtful ideas.

And, finally, we need 18 judges (three for the initial screening, three for each of the four categories, and three for the final judging). If you're interested in volunteering to be a judge, please contact me at [finn@nasw.org](mailto:finn@nasw.org). ■

[*Science-in-Society Awards deadline: Feb. 1*]

## TWITTER

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that it was a little annoying. You don't need to tweet every point made at a conference and you need to be conscious of the fact that posting in quick succession fills up people's pages. If it's not that useful, people will stop following you (and you'll soon be tweeting on your lonesome).

**Share links.** If you're tweeting about a piece of content, you must give us a link or you'll be "that guy" who doesn't have a clue. Also: Use a free URL shortening service such as [is.gd](http://is.gd) or [tunyurl.com](http://tunyurl.com).

**Show some personality.** If you're just sending out links to your own content or whatnot, it's kind of boring. Mix it up a little by sharing other sites' content.

Acknowledge tweets directed at you. If you receive an "@" reply (there's a tab to filter just these on your Twitter home page), it's good form to "@" the user back (e.g. "Hey @disco\_dave check this out: <http://url.com>" to which I'd reply "Thanks @user, that's really interesting and I'll be sure to blog about

it"). As you gain more followers, you'll get more of these and will have to ignore the less important ones so you can maintain a shred of sanity. I'm not at that point yet, but know some very popular Twitter users who are.

There are other more mundane details, but I won't bore you with them. Also, I don't profess to be a Twitter pro. Some people have thousands of followers while I have a fluctuating number around 170, but that number does go up each week. So I'd like to think that I'm doing something right. ■

## WORKSHOPS

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Andy Boyles is science editor at *Highlights for Children* magazine and an acquiring editor at Boyds Mills Press (trade books for young readers). *Highlights* depends almost entirely on unsolicited manuscripts, which is something Boyles is trying to change. He'd like to make more assignments.

Stories for *Highlights* should illustrate that science is an ongoing, self-correcting process and should help kids understand and connect with the world around them. The magazine also likes to show kids as participants in science. "We are always looking for content that a kid can read about and then go outside and see," Boyles said. A good story line is important. Payment varies.

While the magazine is edited to maintain a certain voice, books allow a writer's voice to shine through. Writers get a small advance and royalties from sales. You can reach Boyles at [ahboyles@highlights-com.com](mailto:ahboyles@highlights-com.com). ■

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