

Journalism Is Subject of Ethics Group Meeting

THE AAAS Professional Society Ethics Group met on 21 April to discuss the role of the media in disseminating information that may contribute to the public's understanding of ethical issues in science and engineering. Science reporters from the Associated Press (AP) and National Public Radio (NPR) shared their experiences and described how science and engineering stories are treated by the print and broadcast news media.

Richard Harris, a science reporter for NPR and a former AAAS Mass Media Science and Engineering fellow, explained how science news stories are obtained and what constitutes news at NPR. Professional journals, meetings, and press releases are the sources for most science news stories, he said. Harris observed that science reporters tend not to use business press releases as a basis for a story because these usually promote a product or service. When evaluating a press release, Harris generally tries to look for stories which do not promote the interests of one individual, group, or institution over another. Harris was not aware of many reporters who have any formal training in identifying and analyzing ethical issues and said they tend to rely mainly on their intuition to identify ethical issues in stories. He also noted that the time constraints which reporters usually face in meeting deadlines often preclude their investigating the issues as much as they would like in order to get a broader perspective on a story.

What constitutes science news

may vary from one news medium to another. Harris remarked that science stories which may be fundamentally interesting to a science discipline or which pose philosophical questions are not always considered newsworthy. Editors typically have the decision-making power to select which stories are published or put on the air. If a story does not reveal discoveries, facts, or interpretations which have practical implications, then it is harder to convince an editor to air it. Ironically, Harris noted that news stories involving engineering which do have practical implications for innovative ways to improve people's lives are often not published because such improvements are often imperceptible to the public. Successful engineering feats which improve efficiency or safety become invisible when introduced into our society because these technologies do what we expect them to do, he said.

Warren Leary, a science writer with the AP for the last 16 years, remarked that editors tend to look for news accounts which are controversial, understandable, and compressible into a short space. He observed that in making science news understandable a reporter must realize that the public undergoes a slow education process in grasping new scientific terminology. Thus science reporters must make their stories as straightforward as possible without talking down to the reader. The use of examples is one good way to introduce the public to scientific language. For instance, when Leary first began writing for AP

he could not use the word "cholesterol" without defining it in lay terms, such as "fatty globules in the blood." Now the word cholesterol is widely used and understood.

According to Leary, an effective way to introduce the public to new or broader aspects of science is to tag stories in other areas onto a popular science issue. For example, stories about immunology, virology, or even civil rights can be presented to the public by making a connection between these areas and their impact on the AIDS virus, a subject which has been written about extensively. By using this approach, Leary said, reporters may find it easier to have news stories dealing with important aspects of science approved by editors because of their connection with a topic in which the public has already shown great interest. In preparing a story, a good science writer, he asserted, takes a serious approach, is thoroughly familiar with the issue, discovery, or invention before interviewing scientists, professional societies, or science institutions involved, and is able to make a science story interesting to a lay audience.

Even though the AP organization is one of the world's largest news services and has some 1000 reporters working worldwide, it has only five science writers. Leary observed that most writers tend to stay on the science "beat" longer than other reporters, who tend to rotate from area to area every few years. This dedication, he believes, may be due to the fascination which science writers have for the topics they cover and the everchanging nature of their subject.

As a science writer, Leary is inundated with information. If a scientific or engineering professional society believes that an issue must be brought to his attention, he said, then that society must convince him that its concern is important to the ordinary person's life. While Leary states that it is his obligation to write stories which serve the public, not the scientific com-

munity, he recognizes that news stories which serve the public may also benefit the scientific community by increasing public understanding and appreciation of science.

Leary avers that the scientific and engineering professions must demystify themselves in the minds of the public and focus their concerns on more human, less technical, levels. Professional societies have an important role in making science more responsive and responsible to the public, he says. Leary suggested that if a professional society has a staff member familiar with journalism who understands the needs of reporters in obtaining information or comments quickly, then the responsiveness of that society to emerging issues would increase, and the profession would have a readily available channel through which to air its concerns.

The Professional Society Ethics Group will next meet on 27 October in Washington. For more information on its activities, contact the author at the AAAS Office of Scientific Freedom and Responsibility.

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Panel for U.S./ Chilean Science Formed

At the invitation of the Chilean Academy of Sciences, a panel of six prominent U.S. scientists visited Chile 3–10 May. The panel was sponsored and organized by the AAAS with the cooperation of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Academy of Sciences. Support was provided by a grant from the MacArthur Foundation.

The visit, the purpose of which was to explore ways to increase cooperation between U.S. and Chilean scientists, was hailed by the U.S. embassy in Santiago as very important. "The Chilean scientific community," the em-