



WFSJ

World Federation of Science Journalists

A debate on conflicts of interest in science journalism

On the closing day of the [2020 Annual Meeting](#) of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in Seattle (WA, USA), about five dozen science journalists, science communicators, science journalism students and scientists gathered for a lively ‘[House of Commons-style](#)’ debate on the development of ethical guidelines for science journalism.

The screenshot shows a mobile news interface. On the left, a dark-themed article titled "The coronavirus is spreading rapidly. So is misinformation about it." by Kim Bellware, dated February 10 at 11:54 PM CET. Below the article is a small image of a smartphone displaying a news app with "CORONAVIRUS" headlines. On the right, a blue banner reads "Why we're here" with the AAAS | 2020 logo. Below this is a photo of a crowd of people wearing face masks at a subway station, with the text "Integrity, Credibility, Trust" overlaid in large white letters.

The debate prominently featured issues related to real or perceived financial conflicts of interest of science journalists, such as mixing independent journalism and PR, or receiving income, gifts or payments from organizations that journalists are supposed to critically cover.

Wifi: #AAASmtg Pw: #AAASmtg

AAAS | 2020

DEVELOPING ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR SCIENCE JOURNALISM

DISCUSSANTS:

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MODERATORS:

Peter Vermij (NLD)

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Kai Kupferschmidt (GER)

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#AAASmtg #SciJourEthics

The session, co-moderated by [Peter Vermij](#) and [Kai Kupferschmidt](#), featured introductions by [Tamar Haspel](#), award-winning, US-based freelance food science journalist and Washington Post columnist, and [Caroline Fisher](#), associate professor of journalism at the University of Canberra (Australia), who researches conflicts of interest in journalism. Before entering the scientific field, Fisher served as a political broadcast journalist and (subsequently) as a political media advisor.

Full disclosure

Tamar Haspel kicked off by explaining how the human mind is never able to fully shield itself from financial conflicts of interest. Whatever you do, you are bound to be influenced by financial arrangements with others. If, as a freelance journalist, you need to have such arrangements, in part in order to be able to see and interact with the world, then full disclosure is the best way to go. On [her website](#), Haspel therefore [publishes](#) her own 'ethical guidelines' and her public speaking engagements — even though that may land her in [trouble](#).



Ethically questionable behaviors

The discussion kicked off with an open question: “Have you witnessed science journalists behaving in ethically questionable ways?”

By far most of the participants have, they demonstrated by moving to one side of the aisle. Various observations were offered: journalists wining and dining as guests of industry players, journalists knowingly presenting information in misleading ways, journalists accepting company-sponsored reporting trips, and freelancers working for universities who also write stories in newspapers about scientists from those same universities, and not disclosing that fact. A participant mentioned advocacy organizations managing to get a lot of advocacy pieces that are presented as independent journalism.



Before the actual 'House of Commons' debate went underway, the audience was encouraged not to criticize the motions for being simplistic (they always are) but to interpret them however they saw fit and use them to make their points in the discussion.

Managing conflicts of interest

Caroline Fisher, who studies conflicts of interest in journalism at the University of Canberra, zoomed in on conflicts arising from freelancers 'wearing two hats'. Such conflicts need to be managed 'terribly, terribly carefully', she said.

In her research, Fisher found that most journalists tend not to disclose conflicts of interest in the hope of 'getting away with it', something she referred to as 'the hypocrisy of journalism' in which journalists demand scrutiny of others but not of

themselves.



She acknowledged disclosure is risky, since it may draw attention to conflicts and invite suspicion where there had been none. So the issue, she said, requires good thought.

Pros and cons of disclosure

Following this introduction, the first motion was tabled: “Science journalists must always publicly disclose all financial conflicts of interest, including income, free travel and lodging.”

Most of the session participants agreed with this motion. Among those who disagreed, one said ‘you can bite the hand that feeds you’. Haspel countered that ‘we don’t know when we’re being biased’. “Other people’s biases are always obvious to us, while our own are perfectly opaque. [...] This is why judges have to recuse themselves.”

Fisher added that in general, her research showed her, newspaper editors don’t support disclosures for a variety of reasons or excuses.

Tim Appenzeller, editor of *Science*, said however that he would see a disclosure statement under a story as a last resort because, had there been a financial conflict, he would not have wanted to assign the story to that particular journalist to begin with



A line between Journalists and non-journalists

The second motion to be discussed was: “Those with more than 1/3 of income coming from non-media clients may not advertise themselves as ‘journalists’”.

Considering the outcomes of previous [surveys](#), this would mean that a considerable part of those who now advertise themselves as ‘science journalists’ should in the future no longer do so.

While most in the audience were not comfortable with a clear border between journalists and others, some offered support to the idea.

“I’m not sure I do agree with the 1/3, but I do agree that there’s a certain point where how you define ‘a journalist’ matters”, said Deborah Blum, director of the Knight Science Journalism Program at MIT. There is a difference, she said, between someone who is solely doing independent inquiry in science and someone doing corporate science communication. “I do think it’s important for us to allow those lines to be there, and that we allow people to understand what a ‘journalist’ actually is,” she said. “I see that becoming a blurry definition, but I think it’s really important to acknowledge that there are things about journalism itself and the way it stands separate from the scientific enterprise, that it actually matters if we’re going to understand what journalists do.”

Others highlighted the difficulties of making a living from just freelance science journalism as an argument to allow for income from other ‘non-conflicting’ kinds of work. (That of course basically reformulates the question as what would properly define ‘non-conflicting kinds or work’.)



Abiding by guidelines

The final motion that was put up for debate was: “I would abide by new ethical guidelines if they would conflict with any of my current practices.”

Put on the spot this way, most participants in the room said they would indeed follow guidelines as they would be agreed. Some would not commit upfront to abiding by future guidelines, however, for example because they might disagree with them or because they might not be sufficiently backed by the wider community. Also, guidelines that might work in the United States or Europe might not be adopted automatically in other world regions.



Tinsley Davis, director of the US National Association of Science Writers (NASW), described the ongoing project in which NASW is preparing a new guidance document for members to negotiate real or perceived conflicts of interests. Final drafts of that document, to which many NASW members have contributed, were still in the works at the time of the debate.

Most journalism ethics codes still assume the world is black & white.

Journalism

Non-journalism

They miss a big elephant in the room: blurring lines in science journalism.

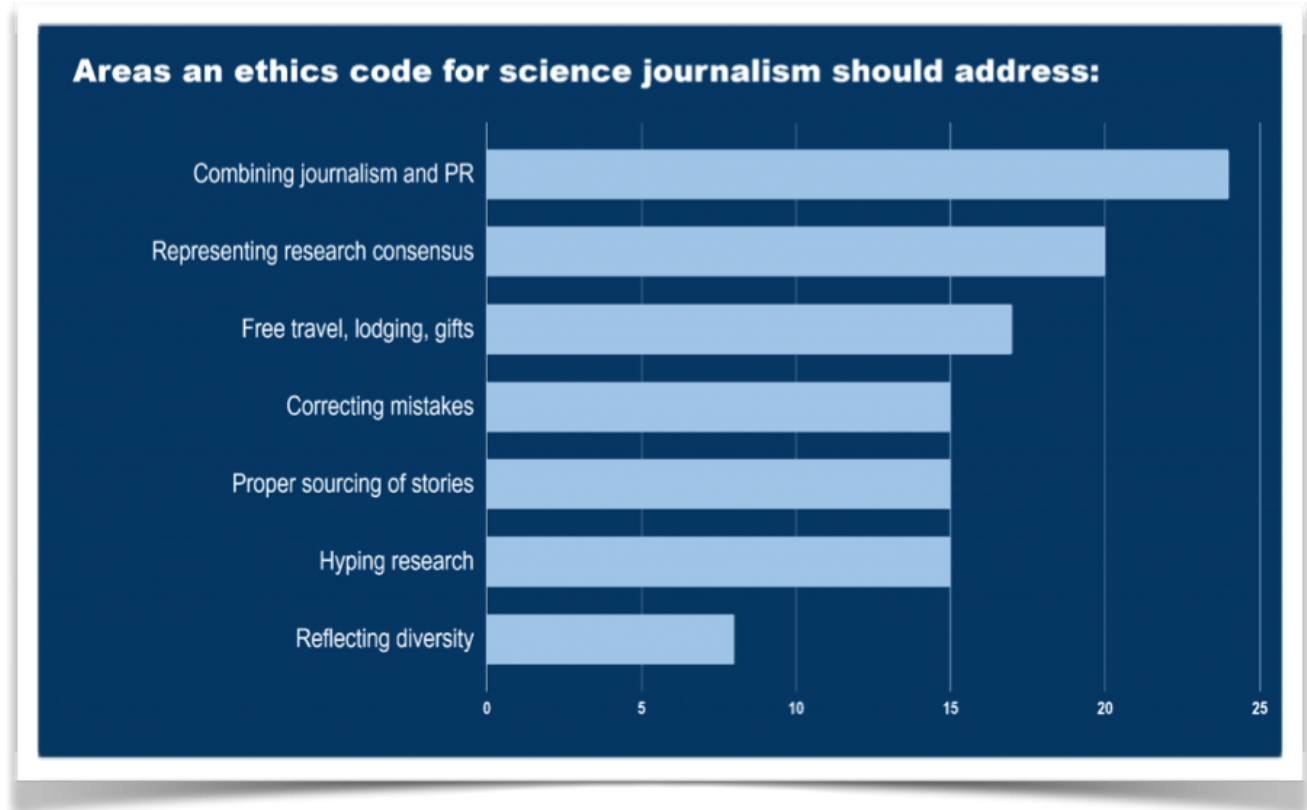
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
SCIENCEWRITERS™

Code of Ethics for Science Writers

One of the principal aims of the National Association of Science Writers, according to its constitution, is to "foster the dissemination of accurate information regarding science and technology in keeping with the highest standards of journalism." This code of ethics is intended to

Priorities

Finally, a quick poll was held to get some rough idea of how people in the room would rank a number of issues that could be addressed in (global) guidelines. Each attendant was asked to tick three issues that guidelines should mostly address.



'Combining journalism and PR' topped the list, followed by 'Representing research consensus' and 'Free travel, lodging, gifts'. 'Reflecting diversity' ended up at the bottom of this selected list.

The ranking should be handled with caution, however, since other signs in the modest-sized audience pointed to many in the room not being part of the science journalism community.

