



WFSJ

World Federation of Science Journalists
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Theme Report : ETHICS IN SCIENCE JOURNALISM

World Science Forum 2019 (Budapest)

PLENARY SESSION

When politics and science collide, scientists and journalists may also collide, 22 November 2019



Science journalists are not scientists, but they are closer to science than any other group of journalists. Yet, science journalists should be even closer to journalism than to science — even though some might disagree. The boundary between supporting the facts and being a cheerleader or an activist for science or environment becomes

sometimes blurred and journalists might cross the line without even noticing. Having a clear code of ethics and conduct for science journalists would be helpful to keep an unbiased reporting even when one has a strong personal opinion on the topic.



Journalists are constantly asked to be impartial and unbiased and are often criticized if they pick a side. Still, sometimes journalists, namely science journalists, are criticized for not defending science, for not hiding some issues that the science community feel embarrassed about or for exposing scientists' faults. At times, science journalists are expected to picture science as a perfect endeavour, but that's not really a journalist's duty.

These different views became evident during the session "When politics and science collide, should science journalists pick a side?", at the World Science Forum 2019, in Budapest. The session was attended both by journalists and scientists which frequently sat in different sides of the

room transformed into the House of Commons. Sitting on different sides meant not only different opinions or professional biases, but especially that the two groups saw the journalism mission in a totally different way.



The session was moderated by **Kai Kupferschmidt**, a contributing correspondent for Science magazine, based in Berlin, and **Peter Vermij**, a science communicator and communications advisor, based in Amsterdam. It all started with a kind of consensus: people in the audience reported being familiar with the collision between politics and science. From country leaders that reject science to those that influence scientific public organizations, from the ones that base scientific and healthcare decisions on religion or ideology to those that pretend to use science but cherry pick the ideas that accommodates their views, there's a growing number of examples.



To report on these topics, science journalists often need to interview different sources. To find the balance is the golden-standard for journalists, but picturing opposite sides of the story (like having one side based on misinformation) might end up being a false sense of balance — for example, it isn't supposed that a debate on a new vaccine have doctors and anti vaccination activists, rather doctors/scientists with different inputs based on science. Besides, a second (or third) opinion must still be from experts in the same field of research. You wouldn't look for a theoretical physicist if you are writing about epidemiology issues.

Besides balance, scientists want journalists to expose politicians that are misleading or science denialists, but are not so keen that journalists expose scientists misconduct. Some may think it is not a problem that scientists overstate some evidence in order that is more impactful — like in the example of scientists using misleading data about Amazonian fires —, but journalists' job should be to stick to facts and fact check the information they get.

Yet, even among journalists the attitude was not consensual. One journalist said that science journalists should report on the Amazonian fires and that the use of misleading data should be reported by other reporters (not specialized in science). Many science journalists in the room disagreed, as they think that science journalists should report on both.

It was hard for scientists — and maybe for some science communicators



— to understand why science journalists wouldn't defend science when it is under attack by politicians, especially when they use false arguments to reject a scientific

consensus. Also, journalists' neutrality and objectivity was questioned and they were asked to pick a side — naturally, to pick the science side.

Journalists, though, have the mission to give the audience correct information and if they end up defending science in the process that is just a beneficial side effect of rigorous reporting. Yves Sciama, the president of the French Association of Science Journalists (AJSPI), made it as clear as possible: “When you write a story you’ll be attacked on the fact that you have made yourself visible by taking sides and in some way it will weaken your story”. The most important thing is to

ensure that the story won't be questioned by facts that are not the core issue of the report.

And as an organization, even a science journalists association, would it be ok to take a side, to have an opinion? Would it even be recommended as a way to reinforce values and credibility? Those are questions that remain to be answered in follow up sessions, workshops or consultations with WFSJ's members to build an universal code of ethics for science journalism.

Video and audio recordings: <https://mta.videotorium.hu/en/recordings/35354/thematic-sessions-iv-a-when-politics-and-science-collide-should-science-journalists-pick-a-side>

Photos: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mtasajto/sets/72157712043435992/>



WORK GROUP DISCUSSION

The first ethical challenge: define who can be a science journalist

WFSJ Brainstorming Session on Ethics and Science Journalists, 23 November 2019



Around 20 science journalists sat around the room — from the Balkans to the United States, from the UK to Argentina — to continue the discussion on ethics and science journalism which started the day before at the World Science Forum 2019. Yet, even before thinking about the ethical guidelines, the community has to define its identity, to make clear who can be called a science journalist and who is entitled to dive into science journalism.

Science journalists can have different different backgrounds, either from science related fields, from social media and journalism or other, but what seems to make the difference is the direction they have chosen at the crossroad: to become cheerleaders and get closer to the science side or act as watchdogs and get closer to the journalism side. From both extremes, science journalists don't seem to understand or accept each other's choices.

The gap between both views turned even wider when science journalists disagreed on the possibility that a science journalist could be working in parallel as a science communicator or a press officer at a university or a research center. The ones that advocate for these mixed tasks say they

can avoid conflicts of interest, the other doubt it. Where's the ethical boundary here?

This brainstorming session was [reported](#) in a news article (below) for the WFSJ Newsletter, in January.



[WFSJ NEWSLETTER — JAN2020](#)

Identity, quality reporting and public engagement: that's what science journalists need

There are more and more scientific papers and less and less science journalists. Making the public and media outlets understand how important science journalism might be the solution for this community.

Vera Novais

Science journalists agree that better quality science reporting is needed and that they don't want to be replaced by science communicators or

other journalists. The first step is to create an identity, to define who is a science journalist and what guidelines could be followed, then to show that science journalism, as journalism in general, is vital for every society in the world. It is the World Federation of Science Journalists (WFSJ) commitment to advocate for science journalism, as it was discussed on November 23, in Hungary.

The WFSJ sat down with some journalists from its member associations to continue the discussion which started in the previous day, at the World Science Forum, on ethical issues in science reporting, but the first questions raised were more related to who are the science journalists and who should be doing science journalism.

The diversity of people in the room was welcomed and has shown that there's no strict rule that fits them all. There are some people that see science journalists closer to science communicators because they are both writing on science, others think that science journalists are closer to political or economics reporters because above all they are journalists and should follow journalism rules and not be science cheerleaders.

There are countries where some science journalists are working also as science communicators for universities, institutions, and companies. For freelancer journalists, this might be the only way to survive but it raises questions about conflict of interests. Among the represented countries, only Portugal seemed to have legislation on who could be a journalist and what journalists couldn't do. For other countries it is up to each journalist to avoid losing independence. But the journalists fear that blurring the line that separates journalists from communicators can kill science journalism as it is and science journalists with it.

Creating a manual with best practices that each journalist could adapt to the reality of its own country could be a step to help science journalists to settle the quality that is demanded from journalists and from science reporting. But that also means that media outlets should be looking for science journalists. How? First by engaging people with quality science

journalism and then showing the news media outlets that it is worth to have science journalists in their staff or to rely on freelancer science journalism work.

Of course there will always be some media outlets that won't hire science journalists but still continue to write about science. So it might be better to train journalists in those places to do fairly good science reporting because when the general quality of science news increases there might be a greater chance for science journalists to be working on longer and more in-depth articles.

The WFSJ goal is to understand the needs of their members and then to address them. For now the Federation is planning a survey on science journalists: Who are they? How much do they earn? What are their needs? Do they have ideas on how to solve their problems? Then other projects will come in the way and members are invited to take part in them.