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Science Journalism Goes Global

WHEN SWINE FLU STRUCK SWIFTLY IN MEXICO, IT CREATED A CHALLENGE NOT ONLY FOR international public health officials but also for journalists around the world assigned to follow the unfolding story. They needed to explain, in the face of great uncertainty and a nonstop news cycle, what the novel influenza A (H1N1) virus was and the potential dangers it posed. It was a difficult story handled most capably by experienced health and science reporters.

Swine flu is the latest in a string of important global stories across the spectrum of science: stem cell research, the human genome, climate change, new energy technologies, evolution, space exploration, and HIV/AIDS, to name a few.

At a time when global science-based stories such as these are more prevalent than ever, international science journalism faces both great opportunities and great peril. A sense of crisis has gripped the American science writing community, as traditional staff jobs in mainstream print and electronic media have increasingly fallen victim to hard economic times. Content has also shifted toward “science-lite,” with consumer health and fitness often trumping important developments in scientific research and policy. Similar problems have arisen in Canadian, United Kingdom, and European science journalism.

There is growing excitement, however, about emerging opportunities for global expansion of science journalism, particularly in developing countries. Reporters in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America report increasing demand for local stories involving science and technology, the environment, and public health. Although they may struggle with limited resources and political obstacles, they are eager to join the ranks of international science writers.

For journalists from Boston to Beijing, the rapidly changing world of communication technology also offers myriad multimedia options for crossing borders by accessing the latest science, interviewing experts, mining research, and reaching the public in innovative ways. While these new tools—blogs, podcasts, Skype, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter—offer creative outlets, mindless chatter can gobble up precious time. Countless new Web sites provide a dizzying array of science information, misinformation, and commentary that can be hard to sort through. These sites also run the risk of preaching to the converted and subdividing the audience in ways that may narrow the science knowledge base and reinforce uninformed opinion.

In the face of this changing media landscape, journalism and science organizations need to explore better ways to train reporters, scientists, and other communicators around the world in the substance and process of science writing. In doing so, it is crucial that the old-fashioned virtues of good journalism—accurate information, multiple sources, context over controversy, and editorial independence—not be lost in the enthusiasm for communicating content in novel ways.

Opportunities for professional development of international journalists are expanding. Mid-career journalism programs at places such as Harvard, the University of California, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology seek fellows from around the world. The Gates Foundation funds training and travel programs to improve global health coverage in Africa, while international nonprofit groups train reporters from developing regions in global climate change reporting. American science journalists have an ongoing partnership with Arab journalists that widens the horizons of both groups.

Perhaps the best evidence of the growing international nature of this field is the upcoming 6th World Conference of Science Journalists, which is expected to draw about 600 attendees from 70 countries to London later this month. Organized by British science writers working with the World Federation of Science Journalists, a 6-year-old network of 40 science journalism groups, the conference builds skills in covering science and policy, from theoretical physics to food security, while providing a forum for examining common concerns and actions to improve the quality and quantity of science journalism.

Hopefully, the recent crisis in science journalism in Western countries will be tempered by optimism about the overall future of international science journalism and the importance of reaching a global public in dire need of the best science and technology information.

—Cristine Russell

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