Association of British Science Writers (ABSW) submission to the BIS Science and Media Expert group

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Introduction

This submission covers the challenges facing science journalism in the UK and addresses solutions that the government might be able to influence. The suggestions below have been drawn from a wide range of views submitted by ABSW members. Although our membership includes science writers from many different fields, the contents of this report have been predominantly compiled from the views of science journalists working in news or current affairs for national and international publications. These include major UK broadcasters, newspapers and magazines aimed at a general audience and readership. Most of us are journalists first, and science writers second.

It should be pointed out that there appears to be a great deal of scepticism among our members about the BIS 'expert group'. We are particularly concerned that its membership does not include more working journalists (and as a result is not in fact 'expert'). Some members also expressed concern over the partiality of the Chair.

There are many issues that cannot be addressed through government policy. However, it was felt that despite our misgivings this was an opportunity to contribute to an ongoing debate about the future of science journalism. It can only be beneficial for government to have a better understanding of how science journalism works.

We urge the committee to consult experienced science journalists directly (and in person) and to invite ABSW representatives to elaborate on aspects of this document in more detail.

Within this report we have talked exclusively about 'science journalists'. However, many of these individuals also cover environment or health. These areas are all linked and, in most cases, the issues are the same.

Summary

- Science journalism does not exist in isolation from the global challenges facing journalism
- Science journalism has an important role in a democratic society
- Newsroom pressures mean science journalists have less time and resources for in-depth and investigative reporting
- It is important that science journalists (like scientists) are seen as independent from vested political or commercial interests
- We are extremely concerned about the legal implications of reporting science

Recommendations include:

- Initiatives to improve in-depth science reporting
- Communications training for scientists
- Support for schemes that encourage excellence in science journalism
- Support for a review of the UK libel laws as they relate to science journalism

Understanding science journalism

The challenges facing science journalism need to be considered in the wider context of the tremendous changes taking place in the global media. These include the decline in newspaper sales, squeezed budgets for newsgathering, cuts to staffing levels and reduced advertising revenue. This is set against a long-term decline in editorial budgets that has greatly reduced the capacity for organisations to produce high-quality, original journalism. As a consequence, too much of what journalists, and science journalists, do these days is 'churnalism'.

Science specialists no longer have the time to pursue as many original stories. Instead, they spend their time dealing with daily science news and big announcements. This undermines one of the key reasons for having science specialists and the added value they can bring to news outlets.

Journalists are under pressure to produce more, to tighter deadlines. This has reduced the ability of science journalists to do fact-checking, in-depth reporting or even leave their desks. This situation suits organisations that have the capacity to deliver complete stories and packages to journalists, thus setting the agenda for much of what we write.

We are not arguing that science is a special case. Journalistic principals in science reporting are no different to those in other areas. However, we do think science journalism should be valued as highly as other specialist areas (such as education, economics or politics). So much of our world – and the decisions made by politicians – are dependent on science. From climate change to nuclear power, GM crops to stem cells, it is important in a democratic society that voters understand key scientific issues. It is also vital that citizens are able to make their own decisions based on journalism rather than public relations.

There have been many consultations, initiatives and campaigns to improve scientific literacy over the years. There has also been a lack of understanding by government of the role of the science media. Our role as journalists is not to communicate government policy, act as campaigners or advocates of science. It is our job to explain but also question. This is good for science, scientists as well as trust and democracy.

It is a constant source of irritation to the science establishment when a researcher's work is misrepresented. Science journalists are by no means perfect but we are less likely to make basic scientific errors than general news reporters. After all, many of us have science degrees or a science background.

We strongly contest that having a science reporter(s) should not be a luxury. In some cases, understanding this will involve a cultural shift within news organisations. Whether this fits within the remit of a government committee is a matter for debate.

There are now many postgraduate courses training the science journalists of the future. We are concerned that, at present, too many students are being trained for specialisms for which there are too few jobs to go to.

Getting the story out

Why do some science stories get reported and others not? Science journalists obtain their stories from a variety of different sources – some unique to science journalism (such as embargoed journals), others from more traditional sources including personal contacts or press releases.

All journalists are looking for exclusives but many potential science 'discoveries' are announced under embargo. A recent example is the discovery of the massive new ring around Saturn announced by NASA. The extent to which these stories get picked up depends on a number of factors including how well the press release is written and distributed, the extent to which scientists are able to communicate their research, the background knowledge of the journalist and their ability to sell the story to their editor.

Underlying all this is the fact that any science story has to compete with other stories around at the time. There has been a trend in recent years for science

to become part of mainstream news coverage rather than have its own niche section. Many of us would argue that this is a good thing.

Anyone seeking to increase the coverage of science journalism needs to understand how it works in order to maximise the chances of getting their story covered.

Possible ways to improve coverage, which the expert group may be able to influence include:

Improved media awareness by scientists: helping scientists to overcome their fears of dealing with the media.

As journalists we are always trying to get scientists to simplify without over-simplifying. Good media training completely avoids allegations of 'spin' by teaching scientists to identify what is interesting and important about their work. Most science journalists and most scientists have a common goal: the pursuit of truth. If scientists can learn, at early stages in their careers, to overcome their fears of the media and to learn to deliver their science to those that consume it (whether this is the media, policy makers or user groups), this will be better for science and society. Few journalists would argue with scientists being able to communicate better and overcome their fears of dealing with the media.

Communicating research should be part of every young scientist's training. After all, in most cases the taxpayer is funding the research.

Access to information:

1. Science journalists are not experts in all areas. Seminars organised on the background to new and complex areas are often useful. Likewise, fact-finding visits can be helpful. However, it should be kept in mind that journalists are under pressure of deadlines. Webinars are increasingly proving to be effective ways of briefing journalists, or gaining coverage for conferences abroad. Journalists are able to cover events while remaining in the office. Government research agencies might usefully fund the web broadcast of more scientific meetings. It would also be helpful for a research body to set up a calendar of web-based scientific events.

2. Allow journalists free access to scientific literature/scientific papers. Access to the scientific literature is limited by tight editorial budgets, which rarely make an allowance for much, if any, in the way of literature searches. Freelance science journalists are unable to afford to download paid articles, as the margins on their rates are too low.

Allowing free access to the literature to a relatively small community of science journalists has the potential to improve the way we handle the background to stories by removing one of the barriers to high-quality

reporting. This would allow more in-depth reporting and access to primary source material.

One way to achieve the above might be to subsidise journalists to become members of particular university libraries. This would need to be explored in more detail and the ABSW is currently investigating two options for setting up trial site licenses for a number of journalists.

3. Science journalists also have to contend with the problem of quantity over quality. We are bombarded with press releases highlighting 'breakthroughs' and other new research of marginal interest. Organisations such as the Science Media Centre (SMC) have made efforts to only highlight what they see as key science and act as something of a filtering system. Although some of our members have concerns over how the SMC has led the science agenda, it has proved extremely effective in its goals.

We are opposed to an expansion of the role of the SMC because we feel that the organisation already has sufficient dominance over the science news agenda. This demonstrates what an effective organisation the SMC has been and also highlights the weaknesses (identified above) in science reporting.

The committee might want to consider supporting organisations that pull together key research from leading universities. Futurity in the United States is one possible model.

Independence

The great difference between science journalism and science communication is that journalism has the potential to include wider views. It is the nature of journalism that the scientists may not always share these views. In the US, government research agencies have directly supported several science journalism efforts including one national magazine. However well intentioned these efforts are, it is fairly clear that such efforts are seen as propaganda tools for the government and can undermine trust. This could be counter-productive, leading to claims that the reporting is biased and based on government spin. This is particularly important in the context of issues such as climate change or nuclear power.

Rather than supporting science journalists directly, the Government could support the *idea* of science journalism to improve the standing of the specialism. Ways to do this include:

- Publically supporting science journalism, through support for events, discussions and in interviews/public speaking.

- Funding, part-funding or facilitating science journalism awards to encourage reporting excellence. The ABSW previously ran a full set of awards but these were curtailed through lack of sponsorship.

- Create or support journalism fellowships to encourage investigative reporting. This would pay the best journalists to take time from their regular jobs to work on special reports. Project reviews would need to be done by an independent journalism organisation or foundation.

- Create or support a journalism fellowship to allow journalists to take time away to work alongside scientists and better understand how science works. Similar schemes are run in the United States (such as the MBL Fellowship at Wood's Hole MA and a fellowship at Harvard/MIT).

Legal concerns

One of the greatest issues for our members is the threat of legal action over the reporting of science. This has been highlighted with the recent cases of Goldacre, Singh and Wilmshurst.

We feel that the libel laws are having a chilling effect on science journalism. What would reasonably seem to be legitimate questions over the validity of research have been subject to legal action. This, we believe, is stifling debate about scientific concepts, medical practice and treatments in areas where there is not necessarily a 'right' answer. Debate is key to advances in science and medicine and yet fear of libel action is stifling open discussion or criticism. This cannot be good for science or, in the case of new medical treatments, patient safety.

Anecdotal evidence from our members suggests that the fear of legal action is preventing stories from being reported and significantly weakening the impact of stories that are. Investigative journalism of strong public interest is suffering as a result. These effects are being felt most strongly by our freelance members and smaller publications, but are a problem for science journalism at all levels.

We would urge the committee to examine how the laws of libel impact on the work of science journalists and to help encourage a wide-ranging review of the libel laws. We would further encourage the committee to seek evidence directly from those affected. Following these discussions, we would urge the committee to add its weight to a review of the libel laws to encourage coverage of science, medicine and technology.

The group should consider the merits of extending qualified privilege to science, health and other public interest matters. Ways of reducing the cost of libel actions would serve both claimants and defendants, and democratise access to legal representation.

Conclusions

Science journalism in the UK is facing the same challenges as other areas of journalism. We believe work is needed to improve the standing of science within newsrooms. However, we do not think that this is the role of government or a committee set up by government.

If government values science journalism then it can help our cause by considering the recommendations in our submission. We also urge the committee to consult key science journalists directly to understand particular issues and frustrations facing the profession.

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