

# RESEARCH NEWS

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**DATE:** February 12, 2002

**TO:** Officers and Members of the Board of the National Association of Science Writers

**FROM:** Earle Holland, Director, Research Communications, Ohio State University

**RE:** Proposed additions to existing awards programs

During a moment of weakness at last year's NASW business meeting, I accepted an appointment by President Paul Raeburn to chair an ad hoc committee to consider the possibilities of additional awards that would recognize excellence in science writing by practitioners working "outside" of traditional media newsrooms. What follows is more-or-less a "best effort" at assessing the discussion that surrounded this topic. Let me be clear in that this is not a consensus document and in no way is it an effort to suggest any sense of unanimity surrounding this issue.

## **BACKGROUND**

For decades, the NASW, either through its own Science In Society awards program or its affiliation with annual AAAS awards for science writing, has attempted to select the "best" examples of contemporary science writing produced during the preceding year and offer them as models for the profession. While there is nothing in the stated rules for the Science In Society awards that prohibits entries by persons outside of the traditional "science journalist" model, there is an underlying assumption and understanding within the organization that science PIOs and other "non-journalists" need not apply. Because of this, members of NASW who fall outside the traditional "science journalist" model feel excluded by this award process.

For a three-week period in January, 2002, with the help of NASW cybrarian, we convened a dialogue on the NASW-party listserve to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of proposals to alter the current awards efforts, as well as possible categorization of possible awards, and other matters of concern. During that period, at least 20 NASW members shared 184 messages arguing their positions and making proposals. Given that an exceedingly acrimonious thread concerning the organization's alleged "treatment" of freelancers had been running at the time of our discussion's beginnings, our dialogue was extremely civil and on-target. For that, I am most proud of those who took part.

## ISSUES

At the core of the discussion was a set of questions, the most important of which were:

- *Do the current awards exclude (either explicitly or implicitly) PIOs and other non-traditional science writers?*

The Science In Society Awards are regarded by members of NASW as simply the pinnacle of achievement in the profession. This is due mainly to the interpretation that the awards are those “given by us,” untainted by outside support or sponsorship and therefore, reflecting the best of conventional science journalism. Discussions with members of the judging committees over the years – both journalist and PIO members – have reflected that the mindset of the deliberations is focused on contemporary journalism – television, magazines, newspapers – all “newsstand” vehicles. This view immediately eliminates for consideration examples of science writing that are outside such categories. So the answer is sadly yes, the current awards structure effectively prohibits PIOs and other non-traditional science writers from competing equally.

[Please note that this is not a suggestion that those individuals who have undertaken the difficult task of judging entries for decades were intentionally excluding a class of NASW members. It merely reflects the historical mindset and the existing categories.]

- *Should new awards focus on science writing or be broadened to reflect other science communications activities?*

Science PIOs (public information officers) at universities, institutes, agencies, etc., have duties that reflect a broad spectrum of models. Some follow classic PR (public relations) models while others most emulate conventional science journalists. In most cases, there is a mix of activities representing both ends of that spectrum. Practitioners whose work consisted of more non-writing duties understandably voiced support for NASW recognition – through awards – of that mix, while those who were primarily science writers producing stories for the media and directly for the public voiced support for that work. There are other organizations – PRSA (Public Relations Society of America), IABC (International Association of Business Communicators), CASE (Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, STC (Society for Technical Communications) – all have awards programs which routinely recognize excellence in certain activities PIOs may engage in. There is, however, with the exception of CASE, no organizational program intended to recognize science writing by these practitioners.

There was a clear consensus among those participating in this dialogue that NASW should host an awards opportunity – either as a part of existing programs or as a new program – to recognize excellence practiced by these members of NASW. There was no clear consensus as to whether such awards would be only for writing or for broader tasks. Given the nature of the question, and

the historical and organizational environment in which it exists. I am proposing that as a first step, the NASW board should consider only awards for writing. Other recognitions might follow success in making progress in this arena.

- *How might categories be established and criteria set to recognize science writing which is currently excluded?*

Assuming writing awards were supported, first by the Board and then by the membership, a fair and equitable system would need to be created to best reflect the potential types of entries members would submit. The discussion included classifying an entry based on the size of the institution (similar to the circulation numbers for current awards) represented; classifying an entry based on the physical type of medium used (magazine stories, web sites, news stories/releases, broadcast stories); classifying an entry as a single item or a series or collection of items representing excellence; classifying an entry by its efficacy in reaching intended audiences; and other approaches.

Again, feedback from discussants was all over the waterfront. No consensus exists. I would suggest that as a beginning point, the Board should test a simple model. That would entail two basic types of entries vying for the same award. One would be the lengthy, magazine-style piece of writing characteristic of research magazines and some other outlets, usually extending for several thousand words and serving as an equivalent of a major newspaper or broadcast feature. The other would be to allow a sample of several smaller “news stories” which may or may not be topically related. This “body of work” model has been used successfully in numerous other writing competitions. Other subcategorizations by size of organization, by resources, etc., might be considered at a later time.

- *How can new awards be incorporated in such a way as to strengthen the program, recognize excellence throughout the organization, and promote civility and mutual respect within NASW?*

Assuming new awards (or categories for existing awards) for writing, an effort should be made in the evaluation of entries by judges that the same standards of good science writing honored by current awards should be recognized in this new area of submissions. Simply put, all evaluations of science writing are subjective, of course, but all judges share a common set of norms which they believe must be present for a piece to be considered “good.” Interpretation, translation, context, newsworthiness, reader/listener/viewer interest, basic journalism practices – these should all be applied to new award submissions as they are to current entries. There should be uniformity in our demands for excellence in science writing. At the same time, all judges carry with them a collective set of prejudices that have historically fueled the separation of the products of our membership. Concerns over the employment status of the writer, his or her job title, and other past objections should not be seen as immediately disavowing an entry’s consideration of merit. NASW has been exceedingly fortunate in its selection of judges in past years and I am confident

that, given a new, altered set of directives as to what to consider, and new awards and/or categories, those and other judges will properly recognize excellence in science writing regardless of the path by which it came.

## **ACTION**

At this point, the Board should acknowledge receipt of this document and inform the membership of its plans to review and discuss the points raised here, opening the question to a larger audience. After suitable review, the Board should propose new awards or additional categories to standing awards that will recognize excellent science writing regardless of boundaries.

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I thank the Board for the opportunity to participate in consideration of this issue.