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PIOS HAVE THEIR EYES ON THE PRIZE

by Andrew Skolnick

After enjoying nearly four years of calm that followed the constitutional storm over membership designations, NASW may have found a new issue to raise the voices of its members and compel some serious self-examination.

Many public information officer members feel they are not able to compete on a level playing field for the coveted [Science-in-Society Journalism Awards](#). They have urged the [NASW Board](#) to create new awards to recognize superlative science writing done for institutional research magazines and other sponsored outlets.

In response to this request, NASW president Paul Raeburn asked Earle Holland, director of [research communications at Ohio State University](#), to chair an ad hoc committee to consider the addition of one or more new NASW journalism awards to recognize excellence in science writing by those who work outside the traditional newsroom. For three weeks in January, members were invited to post comments on the nasw-pr listserv. After reviewing 184 messages from 20 members, Holland submitted a report to the Board summarizing the issues and recommending the creation of new award categories "that will recognize excellence in science writing regardless of boundaries."

While not likely to become as tempestuous as the battle to do away with "active" and "associate" membership categories four years ago, the debate over PIO awards has been heated at times.

Even among the 20 members who expressed their views on the listserv, there was no consensus as to what the new awards should recognize. Some said they want an award to honor only science writing. Others argue for awards that would recognize a broad range of PIO tasks. However, Holland reported, there was a consensus that NASW's current award system

effectively and unfairly excludes the work of PIOs and that the best remedy would be to create new awards to honor the best of their work.

[University of Southern California](#) science writer Lori Oliwenstein perhaps best summarized that consensus in her post to the listserv: "The work I'm doing as a science writer now is no less real and no less worthy of acknowledgement than it was when I was at [Discover](#). I've written some stuff here that I've been extremely proud of; made hard, basic science understandable for a lay audience on an almost-daily basis; crafted prose, thought about how to tell a story, done in-depth interviews, worried about the best way to construct my lede . . . I've been a science writer every single day.

"Getting an award--heck, even applying for an award--under the NASW imprimatur would do wonders towards convincing me that the organization takes what I'm doing seriously, and thinks that it's important that it be done well," she wrote. "At the moment, that's not the message I'm getting from NASW."

Even those not in favor of adding new awards agree that PIOs have little chance of winning a Science-in-Society Award. The rules do not bar PIOs from entering their work. "But in practice, I think that if PIOs haven't actually been discouraged from entering the competition, it's been pretty clear that if they entered they would not be taken seriously," said Rick Borchelt, director of communications and public affairs at [The Whitehead Institute](#).

The odds indeed speak for themselves. Since its inception nearly 30 years ago, the Science-in-Society Awards have never been given to an entry from an unambiguous PIO outlet. Last year, the award was presented to David Tenenbaum, science writer at the [University of Wisconsin-Madison's](#) Web-based [The Why Files](#). While some say this proves a PIO entry can win, others don't agree *The Why Files* is really a PIO shop. It may be university sponsored, but it's more of an editorially independent medium like [JAMA](#), published by the AMA, or [Science](#), published by AAAS

Holland has been in favor of adding a new award category to recognize the work of PIOs for a long time. "The germ has been festering within me since I shared a limo with former NASW leaders and talked

about awards," he said. "I raised the point that there are no awards for [then] associate members. 'What do you want, Earle, an award for best press release of the year?' was one reply. I understood the spirit of what they were saying, but that was an acutely offensive thing to say, because I've always thought that what we share throughout the organization is an emphasis, and a desire, and a love to do the best science writing possible."

In his report to the Board, Holland suggested adding a new award to honor either the best magazine

writing published in an institutional periodical or the best body of work consisting of shorter science news stories. Unlike some PIO colleagues, he is opposed to the creation of science communication or PR awards. "I'm not for NASW adopting anything but a science-writing award," he said.

Holland and other members are gathering samples of the kind of outstanding science writing for non-traditional newsrooms that they want NASW to honor and encourage with a new award. The examples will be posted to a Web site so that they can be viewed by the Board and NASW members, Holland said.

Judging the Judging

Although statements have been made publicly that a writer's employer is never considered when Science-in-Society submissions are judged, Holland said he has been told by previous members of judging committees "that submission from public affairs and public information people would not be considered from a practical standpoint."

NASW Board member Joel Shurkin—who has twice chaired the judging committee and sat on one in the third year—disputes this: "At no time were they ever considered ineligible for the awards or that their stories were not considered on an equal basis. It was never discussed. It was never an issue."

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In fact, said Shurkin, senior editor of [HopkinsHealth](#), "many submissions by PIOs were in contention and some made the first cut and made it to the finals."

So how can one explain why in 29 years of awards, only one (or according to some, none) was ever given for writing published in a PIO outlet? One reason may be that PIOs didn't think that they are eligible, said Shurkin. "I think that it is possible that we just failed to make sure that they understand that they are eligible for the award-and that's a mistake that should be rectified." Another, harder to rectify reason, he admits, may be the purpose and nature of the Science-in-Society Awards, "which precludes most of what PIOs write."

Robert Lee Hotz, a science reporter for the [Los Angeles Times](#), shares that view: "It's important to keep in mind that the Science-in-Society Award was established for the very specific reason of honoring and encouraging the kind of science writing that asks uncomfortable questions about science-the kind of stuff that most of us don't do, no matter if we're newspaper staff writers, or magazine freelancers, or trade publication people, PIOs, or what have you. I have never won this award and most of my work didn't even qualify for it. So I'm not speaking from a position of privilege. It's not the sort of thing that any of us do except under extraordinary circumstances. And that's what makes this award special."

While it may be hard for journalists to win NASW's award, it's next to impossible for PIOs, said Kelli Whitlock, director of research communications at [Ohio University](#). "NASW is an organization of people who write for many different media, in many different formats, for many different employers. It would be good if more than just those who are able to do investigative pieces have some kind of award for which they can fairly compete."

Respectful Opposition

"I have a great deal of respect for the amount of thought that Earle has put into this and the care that he's taken to generate comments from other members," said Hotz. "The way he's gone about the whole thing is a model for how all of us should proceed when proposing a new idea. Having said that, I couldn't be more strongly opposed to this idea of an award for PIOs. I think the award Earle is proposing is fine, but not for us. NASW is a very big umbrella over very different people with different professional goals and ethics. There's only one thing that unites us and that's our belief in the power and importance of science writing. So I am concerned about things that divide us up into our little sub-divisions."

Rick Borchelt agrees: "I believe that if we as PIOs make the argument that our writing is as good as any that shows up in the [New York Times](#), on [NPR](#), or in [Discover](#), then it ought to be judged alongside that writing and not segregated to a separate category. We have argued for many years that our writing is as strong as the writing that appears in non-sponsored outlets. We need to have the courage of our convictions and work towards an alternative solution rather than an alternative award that's divisive."

NASW President Paul Raeburn also is opposed to creating new PIO awards. "Writing by PIOs can be very good, their stories can be very newsy, they can be eloquent, they can be many things that we like to encourage in science writing, but institutional-sponsored stories as a rule do not dig into things, they do not cause trouble," he says. "Science-in-Society Award entries ought to be disturbing, ought to give the status quo a little shake. Institutional writing rarely if ever does that. So what we are left is an award that would simply recognize good writing. And I don't think that that's a good enough reason to create another award."

There are many awards around that recognize good science writing, including writing for institutional settings. But clear and effective writing is what our institutional members ought to be doing. That's what we should expect from all members. So if you want to recognize them with an award, you should recognize something that goes beyond that. In the case of institutional science writing, I don't know what that can be."

Hotz believe these efforts to create another award are heading in the wrong direction. In fact, he would prefer the elimination of all but one very important NASW award presented every year to honor the finest work in any medium by anyone-whether by a newspaper reporters, magazine staff writer, freelancer, or PIO-that best communicates the effects of science on society for good or ill. "I think we should be comfortable making that value judgment and we should be comfortable

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elevating the award to that level," he said.

Going Too Fast?

While not necessarily opposed to creating new PIO awards, NASW Vice President and President Elect Deborah Blum wants the association to take time to consider the effects of such action. "We changed the constitution almost four years ago, after years of very contentious battles," she said. "It was a fundamental change to recognize the diverse nature of our organization and the need to respect what all in the organization do. After that, we just kind of rested to let the organization heal and only dealt with housekeeping issues. This is the next big policy issue we will have to struggle with.

"What makes it a bigger issue than just an award is that our organization has a long tradition of encouraging and honoring independent-minded and provocative science writing. While we also try to raise the bar for science writing with workshops and other programs, we have used our award to do what no one else does in science journalism-that is to stand behind science journalism that shakes things up. The Science-in-Society Award is at the heart of who we are and what we stand for.

"It seems to me that we're doing this backwards. Instead of saying let's change the award and then sit around and look at the fallout, I want to do it the other way around. I want us to think about what NASW is and where we want to take it and then decide what if any kind of award can help take us there. We need to be careful not to change the organization in a way we don't want to go."

In one of his posts to the listserv Holland said, "Our jobs are often harder... Our jobs are often harder than that of our alter egos in the conventional newsroom. We have to do quality science writing in an environment that expects us to produce pap and propaganda. The problem is that our newsroom brethren often believe that we are practitioners of the latter-not the former. This award effort is our chance to prove them wrong."

Holland is not alone: "I think a lot of reporters who have never worked in public information do not understand that there are those of us who battle with our administration every day to do the right thing," Kelli Whitlock said. Having examples of institutional writing that were honored by a NASW award would give her a powerful weapon, with which she could go into the senior administrator and say, "I understand your concerns, but this is the work ethic that [NASW] expects from its members-this is what they consider the best science reporting.

"This is a very frustrating issue and it's not easy," she added. "There are going to be hurt feelings before it's all said and done, but that doesn't mean we should just walk away from it."

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a freelance science/
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