

Written evidence submitted by the Association of British Science Writers (COM0124)

The ABSW is a UK membership organisation set up in 1947 to promote the public good by improving general access to well-informed writing about science and technology, including scientific, but not practitioner, areas of medicine. It is the oldest body of its kind apart from the National Association of Science Writers in the US, and has nearly 300 members.

We work in a number of ways, especially by the provision of training and networking for members, the holding of professional development events, and running the UK's national prizes for science writing and journalism. This note sets out some of our members' key concerns as they emerged from a recent consultation. It does not reflect the full views of our membership, who between them share a wide range of opinion and insight.

Our members do their work in a wide range of ways. Some make radio and television programmes; others write books (over 100 of them in one individual's case); others work mainly online and in print. However, our concern here is to emphasise the importance of a specific area of our work, front-line science journalism, rather than the profession as a whole.

Science journalists carry out a vital yet sometimes under-appreciated role in the communication of science to the public. They are not simply conveyors of scientific information, but also act as guardians of the public interest. They have a unique role within the broader body of science communicators because they are independent from the individuals and organisations that perform science. This means in turn that they have a wider remit than the science public relations profession.

While science journalists play an important role in informing the public about new developments in science, including any implications for society, they also have a responsibility to the public to scrutinise both scientists and their work critically. This watchdog function is also a service to the scientific community (although this is often not appreciated) because it helps to expose and discourage wrongdoing and bad behaviour by scientists.

The climate for science journalism in the UK has improved in many ways in recent years, for example by the establishment of a range of (usually) Masters-level courses in science communications. However, science journalism has also been exposed to the same pressures as other areas of journalism, particularly in traditional print and broadcast media. Greater pressure on budgets, largely due to a decline in revenue from advertising and other sources, has led to cuts in staff, including science correspondents and editors, in many newspapers and broadcast news organisations. Nevertheless, most, but not all, UK national newspapers still have at least one science news specialist on their staff. At the same time, a number of new digital news organisations have appeared over the past few years and have hired science reporters.

Changes in the consumption of news, particularly online, mean that audiences can be more selective about which stories they read. While stories about science, health and technology are often rated as relatively popular in surveys of audiences, they can be easier for a casual reader to miss online than if they appear in a printed newspaper or feature on a broadcast news bulletin. Conversely, the interested reader online can reach a wider range of stories, in greater detail, than those who rely on print and broadcast media.

It can be difficult for traditional and new media alike to cover science stories if they do not have a dedicated science reporter. Science journalists often build up extensive networks of experts who can provide advice, insight and comment. This in turn allows more rigorous journalistic examination of a story. And they often have better background knowledge of key scientific issues than do general reporters.

Written evidence submitted by the Association of British Science Writers (COM0124)

Our members now feel that most of the science writing in British media is generally consensual and does not raise problematic issues. While a new scientific discovery is likely to be well-reported, difficult subjects are often neglected for lack of time and resources, in a media world where people are under pressure to be highly productive in terms of word counts rather than content.

Thus, we know that there is a growing sense of unease about the reliability of scientific research, typified by the increasing number of papers retracted from the scientific literature, and the new awareness that many scientific findings might not be as reproducible as had been imagined. These are stories that can only be pursued with time and effort, which are all too often at a premium in contemporary newsrooms.

In response to this pressure, the ABSW has set aside money to encourage original, investigative science journalism. To our disappointment, we have been unable to find suitable projects to fund, in part because even a major investigative scoop is not seen by journalists as a career positive.

This issue matters partly because science is important (we hope your Committee does not need to be convinced of this), and partly because journalism is important. It is now easy for scientists and science organisations to communicate directly with the public. Many of our members work for scientific bodies that produce their own high-quality scientific publications, and we welcome this development. However a research charity, or an individual scientist with a blog, does not have to tell uncomfortable stories. They write about what interests them, not about what is important, and have no incentive to write anything critical about things that did not work or which show them in a poor light. So the growth in these forms of publishing, which to reiterate is welcomed by the ABSW, needs to be balanced by resources for independent journalism in this field.

In addition, our members note that scientific institutions and organisations themselves are making increasing use of their ability to control the way news is reported about their activities. For example, both the recent Planet 9 paper and the A-LIGO observation of gravitational waves were initially revealed only to a select group of trusted journalists, not to the world at large, despite their global interest. We would very much like to see this practice replaced by general journalistic access to any major story. This very basic research is, of course, paid for almost entirely by the taxpayer around the world. It should be recognised that stronger media management by scientific organisations and institutions can make it more difficult for science journalists to scrutinise the actions of scientists critically, potentially undermining the public interest.

There are many organisations that communicate science effectively. The job of science journalists, however, is to scrutinise developments with a critical eye. Just as wider society is best served by the work of this committee in critically examining the workings of government, it is, we hope, also served by our talented and skilled community of science journalists holding the research community to account. Science journalists are independent and provide a valuable civic service by helping to ensure that scientific organisations, individual scientists and the work they produce is ethical, offers value for money and promotes the good.

We are aware that this pressure on original, high-quality science journalism is only part of the story, and that other specialisms from sport to health suffer from the same syndrome. In addition, the ABSW is an active participant in science journalism globally. We held the World Conference of Science Journalists in London in 2009, and the 3rd European Conference of Science Journalists earlier this year in Manchester. We know therefore that similar issues to those we have mentioned here arise around the world. However, our members are especially conscious of these pressures as they affect the UK. We would be grateful if you could reinforce the case for independent, questioning

Written evidence submitted by the Association of British Science Writers
(COM0124)

science journalism in your findings, and are of course happy to answer any questions you might have.

September 2016