

Career Development Panel Overview: Careers in Science and the Media

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This month's FelCom Career Development seminar explored alternative careers in science communications and media. The seminar consisted of several panelists from a range of print, web and journal based publication houses as well as government and scientific organizations such as FASEB. Each panelist presented his or her role as a communication expert in their organizations, described their journeys into their current positions, and offered insight on how fellows can make the transition from a bench to non-bench career, focusing specifically in science writing and communications.

Dr. Nsikan Akpan is currently the digital science producer for PBS NewsHour. He earned his doctorate in Pathobiology from Columbia University and then did a 9-month extensive fellowship program in science communication at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Prior to joining NewsHour, he wrote and produced content for NPR, Science Magazine, Science News, Scientific American, and Newsweek. He started blogging during his graduate studies and continues to blog using portals like SciLogs. To show the audience a glimpse of what his job entails and how television differs from online science communication, he showed two different science videos. The online web based science video on BuzzFeed was short, fast paced, with lots of graphics, snappy background music as well as giving more of a "big picture" idea about the scientific concept. On the other hand, television report video on NPR's YouTube channel was long, slow and detail-oriented. He stressed the point that communication personnel have to cater to specific audiences. He quoted a NASW survey report from 2014 about salary scales for freelancing science media personnel to be in the range of 35-50,000K while as a permanent employee in publishing group/journals you tend to make more. Apart from the monetary aspects, Dr. Akpan thinks travelling to different places, meeting interesting people and getting to learn new scientific topics are the best perks of his job. He advised fellows to start writing short blog entries to get practice writing in a non-scientific language. He also suggested looking for internships/fellowships to get training and experience.

Dr. Debra Speert, a Communications Director for the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) earned her PhD in neuroscience from the University of Michigan. After 3 years of post-doctoral training at the University of Maryland, Baltimore where she discovered her passion for science writing, she got her first position as an assistant editor in web publishing at the Nature Publishing Group. She produced scientific content about genomics, neuroscience and analyzing big data sets. She then went on to become science writer and public information officer for the Society of Neuroscience (SON), an organization she has been a member of since her graduate days. Her job at SON primarily included managing BrainFacts.org, a public information initiative. In her current job at FASEB, she is involved with producing

various types of communication content, such as news releases, press interviews, scientific commentaries, press releases etc. for members, the scientific community and science policy makers. She emphasized that there has been a decline in the number of jobs in the science media field over the last two decades, but recently many new positions have opened up for those interested in a media career. She also stressed that science must be readily accessible and communicated accurately to make it more interesting for the non-science public. Debra pointed out several key things to include in your CV while applying for positions in science media and the communications field:

1. Provide demonstrable pieces of writing (blog entries, reports, commentaries to prove that you can write)
2. If you have written a grant and it has gotten funded, include that as a proof that you can write well!

In addition to possessing “scientific skills”, such as being analytical, highly organized, and able to verbally communicate, she emphasized that it is important to improve your “soft skills” by gaining experience in program management or personnel management. She also suggested that being a member of one or more professional societies will help applicants obtain positions for more focused job postings.

Rick Weiss, Director of Strategic Communications at DARPA, spoke about his journey into his current position. After graduating from Berkley, Dr. Weiss worked as a science reporter at the Washington Post for 15 years. After a short stint working in a DC based think tank (The Center for American Progress) he took a position as the Director of Strategic Communications in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. His responsibilities included sustaining ‘science policy for science’, which helps to ensure that science funding and operations run smoothly. He also acted as an advocate for ‘science for policy’, in which he emphasized higher understanding of research by policy makers. Dr. Weiss left the White House in 2014 and since then has been at DARPA. He stated that, in his current role, he is involved in the supervision and review of the latest progress in the engineering and technology fields as they relate to the U.S. Defense Department. He also stressed that jobs at the White House or DARPA needs security clearance and are generally restricted to US citizens/residents only. He warned fellows that media and communications is not an easy career path and emphasized the importance of properly preparing for a media career. Further, he recommends that, if possible, applicants should look into science communication fellowships or internships to prepare for a media career and to learn the art of scientific writing. He suggested looking at various NGOs and firms like McKenzie as potential employers as they always need subject experts.

Dr. Wendy Leonard is a freelancer and scientist/medical writer at Harper-Collins Publishing. She has 20 years of experience in science journalism and has published many books ranging over varying scientific topics. Dr. Leonard stressed two key points – first, never “dumb” down the subject matter and second, always write in an exciting, engaging and simplified manner. She also advised that being pro-active and resourceful can go a long way to establishing connections and showing others that you care about the job. Finally she emphasized the importance of being flexible and being able to meet deadlines, as this is a common issue in media based jobs.

Take Away Points:

- Write anything that can help you practice and build a portfolio.

- Guest writing for “The Scientist” or “Scientific American”
 - “In kind” writing which is free writing for a charitable cause
 - Blogging using web portals
 - Grant writing
- Visit www.theopennotebook.com/ and <http://pitchpublishprosper.com/scilance-origins-of-a-writer-tribe/>. These websites give examples of ideas that were pitched to publishers as well as links to the articles themselves.
- Network whenever possible and practice your 1 minute elevator speech. Some of the panelists obtained major opportunities just by chatting with the person sitting next to them.
- Make your CV stronger with writing examples
- Always present information in exciting, engaging, but accurate fashion.