

Annual Meeting of the Council of Science Editors

Montréal, Canada, 3-6 May 2013

I had the privilege of attending the Council of Science Editors (CSE) annual meeting, which was held on 3–6 May 2013 in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. The meeting theme – Communicate Science Effectively: The world depends on it – was well thought out and emphasized effective communication as the need of the hour in the current scenario of global academic publishing.

The meeting was a large affair attended by about 350 professionals from various realms of scholarly communication – journal editors, manuscript editors, publishers, publishing consultants, academic scholars, etc. Keynote speaker, Dr. Jeffery Drazen, Editor-in Chief of the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM), delivered a captivating lecture titled “Two Hundred Years of Communicating the Medical News.” The talk described, with the help of interesting facts and images, how the style of medical reports has evolved over the 200 years of NEJM’s existence. For example, did you know that the first known randomization in a clinical trial was done by the flip of a coin?

In the second plenary address, award-winning New York Times blogger Andrew Revkin spoke about “The New Science Communication Climate,” highlighting how new online tools like blogs and social media can help get science out to the public faster. Some of the recommendations made were that research papers provide a non-technical version of the abstract for public consumption and that scientists make better use of Twitter, which allows effective filtering of unessential information. Revkin also discussed the perils of the media overstating research outcomes.

A total of 32 breakout sessions, held across two days, spanned a wide range of topics, including editorial processes, citation metrics, new developments in the industry, reader access, social media, author-editor relationships, outsourcing, manuscript quality, and publication ethics. Some of the sessions I attended introduced new standards in publishing, such as ORCID and FundRef. I also learned that the ICMJE has a new, user-friendly conflict-of-interest form that covers details that were not captured as clearly in the earlier form. In another session, Barbara Gastel, Professor, Texas A&M University, spoke about how authors from newly industrialized and non-English-speaking countries can be empowered through projects like AuthorAid, which provide intensive training in manuscript writing for journal submission. Darren Taichman, Deputy Editor, Annals of Internal Medicine, in a session on recruiting quality articles, suggested that journals should treat authors like customers and make them feel valued. He also recommended that rejection notices should clearly mention reasons for rejection and what the editorial board is looking for.

Another author-focused session discussed challenges East Asian authors face and provided strong recommendations to bridge gaps between them and international journal editors. Here, Phillipa Benson, President & Owner, PJB Consulting, described the academic scenario in China: for

example, Chinese scientists receive no training in scientific writing at the graduate level, and most English teachers are themselves non-native English speakers. This was followed by Donald Samulack, President, Cactus Communications, presenting the results of a survey that highlighted gaps between author and journal editor perspectives. For example, authors think they understand plagiarism well, but journal editors find plagiarism a common problem in submissions. Finally, Boyana Konforti, Editor, Cell Reports, tied all this information together with examples of best practices that journals can adopt to make the publication process easier for authors. Some of the recommendations included translating journal guidelines into local languages and conducting usability tests on them, making sample papers easily available, sharing video tutorials of the submission process, and specifying clear next steps in peer review reports.

The sessions were interspersed with networking breaks in the exhibit hall. Exhibitors included publishers like Allen Press and BioMed Central; editorial process management services like Thomson Reuters and The Sheridan Group; and author editorial services like Editage/Cactus Communications and Write Science Right. There was also a poster presentation session, with four posters on improving editorial processes eligible for the Best Poster Award. The winning poster, authored by Remya Nambiar and Priyanka Tilak, Cactus Communications, was called “How complete and clear are author guidelines of international English-language journals?” The authors had evaluated author guidelines of various journals and found that most do not provide all the information needed as clearly as possible. Their results emphasized the need for better standardization and regular review of author guidelines.

Overall, I found the meeting very informative, with a strong theme running through all the parallel activities. Adequate free time was available for networking and visiting exhibitor booths. I hope to make it to next year’s meeting as well—2–5 May 2014 in San Antonio, Texas.

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