

Empowerment, trust and iguanas: the World Conference of Science Journalists 2023

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“Who are the decision makers? And what do they do with this?”

This was the line that struck me the most from the World Conference of Science Journalists 2023. It came from Bibi-Aisha Wadhalla, Managing Editor of Health E-News in South Africa, talking about the guiding principle of her community-led publication: audience focus – every story is information to help people make a decision. What action might they take with it?

Never was it more fitting than in a city, and a continent, empowered by science, technology, engineering, and people power to rise from fiercely violent times.

Lest one forget, just three decades ago Medellin, Colombia, was one of the most dangerous places on Earth – scorched by the hand of drug baron Pablo Escobar, with one of the highest murder rates in the world.¹

Fast forward to today and it is a vibrant modern city of modernist, brutalist and traditional architecture, with a stunningly efficient transport network of cable cars, buses, Ubers and colourful Chiva buses. None of this more so than the spotless monorail that forms the spine of the city – built at the height of violence and poverty – that is the pride of its people and a monument to their determination. Despite a still edgy side of the city, no one will so much as litter the metro’s premises.

The hosting of the first World Conference of Science Journalists in South America here was therefore significant, a choice that seemed to truly emphasise the ‘World’ in the name of the conference and the federation that backs it.

The choice of Medellin’s botanical gardens – and its main stage ‘orchidorama’, a stunning wooden hexagon patterned canopy backed by some 4500 species of plants and animals and 139 birds – will take some beating. As will the occasional surprise guests wandering the plenary aisles as a local iguana did.

No surprise that the Colombian organising committee put biodiversity, biopiracy and climate change at the top of their keynotes. It’s the citizens of the ‘Global South’ – low- and middle-income countries like Colombia – that are most affected by the plundering of natural resources, flora, fauna and knowledge by colonialists, and later

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/apr/17/medellin-murder-capital-to-model-city-miracle-un-world-urban-forum>

capitalists, from the global North. It's also they who are most affected by climate change.

This was also the first WCSJ post-pandemic and, again, the impact on those outside high-income countries is striking. We heard sessions about how journalists across Africa, Asia and South America networked together to navigate confusing times – times when, lest we forget, many would-be saviour countries abandoned global concerns to think first of their own. We heard how the countries' scientists took things into their own hands, not least in setting up their own vaccine research and now manufacturing.

Trust was a key term on the agenda. Luisa Massarani of Brazil's Fiocruz, a research institution, described this year's report on the global ethics of science journalism² a key finding of which was how divided/uncertain journalists have become, particularly in Latin America, about neutrality in reporting the news – the proportion of those who do not believe that journalists can, are or should be neutral was slightly higher (49%) than the proportion of those who do. As politicians take up positions that endanger their subjects' health – such as those towards vaccines, or climate denialism – what choices can journalists make in the tone and topics of their coverage?

Although most sessions were in English, a good number were entirely in Spanish, which felt significant and appropriate. It was a refreshing change from international conferences that normally go out of their way to be more accessible by being more English, or catering to the English. Visa obstructions and travel issues raised their ugly head again – as they have in scientific conferences over the past 12 months – but it felt good to welcome so many from across the Americas to the first event on their home continent.

Many I spoke to considered it a miracle the conference had happened, yet alone that it had been such a success. WCSJ had never been held in Africa, South East Asia or South America. Now the talk was of India or South Africa stepping up. Maybe Nepal. Why not?

Who are the decision makers? And what do they do with this?

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² <https://phys.org/news/2023-04-boundaries-ethics-science-journalism-latin.html>