

WCSJ2023: Discussing global issues among the iguanas

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Medellín's botanical gardens were the perfect backdrop for the World Conference of Science Journalists 2023 (<https://www.wcsj.org/>). We bonded over food, discussed science journalism challenges and were collectively amused by the large iguanas that casually wandered into some of the outdoor conference sessions.



The main stage, just before the start of WCSJ2023 at the Jardín Botánico de Medellín

Unfortunately, getting to Medellín was not an option for everyone, even for some writers who had planned to attend. The session about books was one of the conference's most popular and engaging chats, where panellists Sarah Everts, Jennie Erin Smith and Engela Duvenage spent most of the time answering audience questions about writing and publishing popular science books. But the fourth panellist, Alyaa Abo Shahba, was stuck in Egypt because she wasn't able to arrange a visa. She submitted a few statements ahead of time, but her unique perspective as a self-published author was now missing from the live discussion.

Her problem was not unique. As Abdullahi Tsanni mentioned in the session "Reporting on inequity in science from the Global South", visa inequalities make travel to conferences particularly challenging for people from many countries. Notably, this session featured an entirely remote panel. Even though they weren't there in person, it was important to hear their opinions about inequalities for science journalists around the world.



Conference session "Reporting on inequity in science from the Global South"

Later that week, the session "Lessons learned from COVID-19: How network journalism helped to produce scientific stories and tackle misinformation" highlighted a different type of inequality: easy access to information about research. During the COVID-19 pandemic, breaking research news came almost daily, and it was difficult for journalists to keep up. Still, they had a responsibility to accurately report what was happening. Dewi Safitri and Gobinda Pokharel, calling in remotely from Indonesia and Nepal respectively, shared how science journalism organisations in these countries both used online platforms such as WhatsApp or Zoom to support their pandemic reporting. It helped the Society of Indonesian Science Journalists connect with researchers who briefed them on topics related to the SARS-CoV-2 virus or vaccines, while the Nepal Forum of Science Journalists networked to collaborate with European journalists to report on the rapidly moving pandemic news.

Having participants remotely dial in to conference sessions was a good way to ensure that challenges and solutions from different parts of the world were heard. But I bet they'd rather have been there in person to see their audiences, attend other sessions and talk about the free-roaming iguanas during the breaks.



One of the iguanas near the conference venue.

Being at an in-person meeting again definitely had its perks. I met science writers from every continent over coffee, in the bus from the hotel, or at some of the excellent scientific tours and workshops that were part of the conference as well. My three days at the conference were bookended by a visit to the insectary of the World Mosquito Program <https://www.worldmosquitoprogram.org/en/global-progress/colombia/medellin> in Medellín, which breeds Wolbachia-carrying mosquitoes to keep dengue fever in check, and a day trip to the Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) in Cali.

One of the highlights at the Alliance was learning about the new Future Seeds <https://alliancebioversityciat.org/future-seeds> gene bank, which holds samples of beans, cassava and other crops to maintain biodiversity and food security around the world. It's been a month and I'm still processing information and ideas from this visit!



The new Future Seeds facility at the Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture

Experiences such as these are what make in-person conferences so valuable. On top of that, the dedicated space and time of a conference venue lets you explore topics you would never seek out if they were carefully scheduled online talks. But what WCSJ2023 highlighted for me is that these sorts of gatherings are a privilege. Not everyone can easily travel the world and if we want international meetings to be inclusive and global, we need to think about how we can get everyone's voice heard.