

Association of British Science Writers 75th anniversary

A look back on three
quarters of a century
of science writing



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Celebrating
75 years of
excellence in
science writing

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ASSOCIATION OF BRITISH
SCIENCE WRITERS



Continuing a strong specialist science writing tradition

What would the founders of the Association of British Science Writers (ABSW) make of the organisation they set up, 75 years later? No doubt they would be delighted to know that it is still running, although once or twice that was not absolutely certain, as you can read in the timeline that follows in this booklet. They would probably be amazed by the technological changes that allows us all to write on computers, increasingly often remotely from our co-workers. But they would also probably be reassured by some similarities in how the organisation runs today compared with 75 years ago.

Most people still join the ABSW as either a 'member' or an 'associate member', the two categories available at the outset. Members must still make most of their income from science writing or journalism, while associates encompass almost all others who promote the understanding of science.

Another thing that remains the same is the thorny discussion over the classification 'science writer' as compared to 'science journalist'. Have you ever wondered why the ABSW's name includes 'writers' rather than 'journalists'? It seems strange to many people, especially given that the five founding members in 1947 were all journalists. Here is one reason: we are the world's second oldest such association, and we followed the example of the oldest, the US National Association of Science Writers. Founding chair James Gerald Crowther, of *The Manchester Guardian*, known today simply as *The Guardian*, was an NASW member before the ABSW existed.

But there is another possible reason for the ABSW's name, uncovered in research done by James Farry at the University of Manchester. Farry dug through archives including Crowther's personal papers and internal correspondence at *The Guardian*. Farry's work shows that in 1947, Crowther and his fellows were reluctant to call themselves 'science journalists', preferring the term 'scientific journalists'. They firmly considered themselves scientific experts who explained concepts for their publications. They were more like the recent University of Cambridge Professor of the Public Understanding of Risk Sir David Spiegelhalter than many of today's science journalists. However, unlike Sir David, who was shortlisted for an ABSW award last year, their editors felt that scientific journalists didn't write the readable copy they wanted for their audiences. The editors also wanted writers who would criticise science and scientists when necessary. Yet the early scientific journalists would stubbornly fight their editors.

Inevitably that had to change – but how? The following booklet lays out the story of the ABSW and our profession's evolution over the past 75 years. Stick with us until the end to find out how the scientific journalist saga played out, and much more.

Andy Exance is ABSW chair and a freelance science writer.

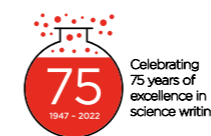
Cover images:

Top: ABSW honorary president and BBC science correspondent Pallab Ghosh (right) gives former BBC *Tomorrow's World* presenter Judith Hann (left) a lifetime achievement award in 2022.

Second from top: ABSW chair Connie St Louis (left) gives Shanta Barley (right) the best newcomer award in 2011.

Third from top: Three ABSW chairs meet at the British Association meeting at Stirling University in 1974. From left to right are Martin Sherwood, James Gerald Crowther, the ABSW's founding chair, and Bernard Dixon, *New Scientist* editor.

Bottom: Two modern ABSW stalwarts, Sir Philip Cambell (left), currently editor-in-chief of Springer Nature, and Oliver Morton (right), currently briefings editor at *The Economist*, at the ABSW awards in 2004.



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March 3rd, 1947, at 1pm

Four science writers meet for the first ever meeting of the Association of British Science Writers. Foremost amongst them is James Gerald Crowther of *The Manchester Guardian*, known today simply as *The Guardian*.

In 1928 Crowther became Britain's first professional science journalist. Before helping found the ABSW, Crowther had been a member of the US National Association of Science Writers (NASW), the only older comparable association. The NASW and ABSW will work closely together until the mid-1950s.



August 8th-15th 1947

ABSW honorary president Sir Richard Gregory hosts a young Duke of Edinburgh at the 113th annual British Association (BA) for the Advancement of Science meeting. That includes welcoming him to an ABSW wine reception, according to former member James Lawrie. Gregory is the first of the leading academics the ABSW recruits to act as ambassadors.

He is an octogenarian astronomer and baronet, who has already been editor of the journal *Nature* and is president of the BA. Gregory helps initiate a close relationship between the ABSW and BA that lasts several decades. He will be followed as president by many leading figures in science, including the science populariser and eugenicist Julian Huxley and transplantation pioneer Peter Medawar.



Founding ABSW member Ritchie Calder, left, with the first honorary president Sir Richard Gregory, second left, Henry Tizard, chief scientist to the Ministry of Defence, second right, and John Gregg, Birmingham town clerk.

The rise and rise of science journalism



At 1pm on Monday 3rd of March 1947, four journalists met at the Society for Visiting Scientists in Piccadilly. The minutes record that "it was agreed to form a body called The Association of British Science Writers".

Ritchie Calder, Bill Dick, Maurice Goldsmith and J. G. Crowther, who claimed to be the UK's first science journalist, believed that the openness of science in the 1920s and '30s had been replaced by a more insular culture because of war-time restrictions.

Crowther in particular was concerned that secrecy was hampering the reporting of science and the role it should play in solving societal problems, such as the malnutrition that was widespread in the UK as a result of mass unemployment and poverty at the time.

Other national journalists soon joined the founding four, including those from the *Financial Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Mirror*, *Daily Express*, *New Scientist* and the BBC. Together, they established science writing as a profession in the UK.

Although the ABSW's abiding purpose, to report science and raise standards of journalism, remains the same, much about the organisation has changed, especially in the past 25 years since our Golden Jubilee.

A booklet published to commemorate the 50th anniversary states that

|| "the ABSW began as a self-appointed elite, in common with the rest of the British establishment."

It was an exclusive gentlemen's club, with very few women and no people of colour in photographs from the time. The main role of the executive committee was to establish whether an applicant was worthy of membership. And the links to the scientific establishment and research companies were much closer.

Our activities focussed on briefings and off-the-record lunches with eminent scientists for those judged to have met the required standard for ABSW membership.

Today's ABSW is more professional and less self-serving. The worthiness test was scrapped long ago, and the emphasis has been on bringing science journalists in and helping them develop their careers, rather than keeping them out.

The organisation we have today is the result of the collective effort of successive chairs, board members, and administrators. Here are some of their reflections, which tell the story of our journey since our Golden Jubilee.

Peter Wrobel: "Looking back to my tenure as chair more than 20 years ago, my abiding memory is how much fun it was to be involved with the ABSW. Irresponsible fun, to be sure: the £100K or so that (the pharmaceutical company) GSK shelled out on the science writing prizes went mostly on a grand dinner, but also included enough to pay the salary of our administrator. We were nothing like as well run as today, perhaps because we didn't need to work hard at it. It wasn't healthy, it couldn't last, and it didn't".

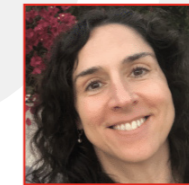


GSK withdrew its sponsorship, and it was left to chair Ted Nield, followed by Natasha Loder, to steady the ship.

Ted Nield: "Soon after I became chair, I discovered that, with sponsorship drying up, we were living beyond our means. Drastic economies were required, to give us time to somehow re-finance the Association, and run it more cheaply thereafter. I and the committee devised a programme of free meetings, seminars, and activities at the Geological Society, who are owed a vote of thanks for this support".



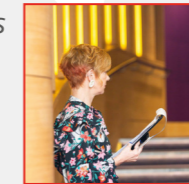
Natasha Loder: "When I arrived as chair in 2009, the Association seemed to have a lot of potential but was struggling to get itself together. It had been spending money in an unsustainable way for years and struggled to define its purpose".



My own term as chair involved working with heads of science journalism associations in other countries to create the World Federation of Science Journalists. It helps science journalism associations work together to promote critical, high-quality science reporting. Central to that process is the WFSJ's World Conferences of Science Journalism, which we brought to London in 2009.

It galvanised the international community of science journalists and inspired Arab, Finnish, American and European journalists to hold their own world conferences. The London World Conference brought great prestige to the ABSW and sorted out our financial problems, making a surplus of over £80,000. Central to its success was our administrator, Sallie Robins.

Sallie Robins: "At times we really had to hold our nerve as the fund-raising and organisational task was huge for the ABSW, but hold our nerve we did, resulting in a conference of nearly 1000 science journalists from all around the globe attending a week of discussions, debates, and memorable parties."



The success of the World Conference inspired the ABSW to run annual skills-building and development conferences for its members in the UK. It was the start of a process that saw us aspire to become a professional body. But an incident at another world conference, in South Korea, led to the organisation entering its most difficult period in recent times.

Martin Ince: "Among the speakers was Prof Sir Tim Hunt, a distinguished British scientist. His comments included various perhaps unwise opinions about women scientists. They were reported by Connie St Louis, an ABSW member and my predecessor as chair.



"The story took a curious turn whereby this white man with a knighthood and a Nobel Prize was taken up as the victim of woke conspiracy, while St Louis, a black woman, was criticised, insulted and threatened.

"The tale is a complex one. But we carried out our central duty of supporting St Louis and her right to report an important story, despite damage which included the resignation of our Honorary President, Sir Colin Blakemore."

The Executive Board decided that, for the first time in its history, the ABSW would appoint a science journalist as its Honorary President. It was intended to signify that although our community wished to continue the same warm relationship with the scientific community it has always had, we no longer required its approval.

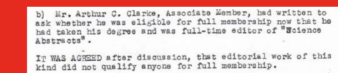
February 11th, 1948

Henry Tizard, chief scientist to the Ministry of Defence, writes to Crowther accepting an invitation to speak to the ABSW over lunch the following month. For many years the ABSW is primarily a 'luncheon club'. Leading scientists and policymakers come to speak off-the-record. Lunches are held at the five-star Dorchester Hotel in London and cost attendees 25 shillings per head, worth about £47 today. While the briefings are mostly off-the-record, rows often erupt when interesting details appear in print.



March 22nd, 1949

Associate member Arthur C. Clarke requests to become a full member but the ABSW board declines. Perhaps this motivates Clarke's interest in science fiction, as he goes on to write the book and film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, released in 1968, by which time he is a full ABSW member. Clarke is one of two early ABSW members who become household names. After studying physics, founder member Henry Chapman Pincher becomes an investigative journalist covering new weapons technology for *The Daily Express*. He then turns his investigative skill to uncovering spies, winning him 'Reporter of the Decade' in 1966.



1949

Ritchie Calder, one of the original four founders, takes over the ABSW chair from Crowther. Calder is science editor of the *News Chronicle*, a daily newspaper absorbed into the *Daily Mail* in 1960. At the time the ABSW sought mainly to comfortably link scientists and science journalists. Yet Calder is also grappling with one of the ABSW's regular challenges – how to become financially self-supporting. His plan is to produce a bibliography on the social implications of science, in a contract with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It is to be worth £400 per year, or £15,000 in today's terms.



Ritchie Calder, ABSW chair from 1949-1951, centre, addresses a group of scientists and science writers.

1955

The ABSW publishes its *Guide to Press Arrangements for Scientific, Medical and Technical Conferences*, edited by Ronnie Bedford, who later becomes science editor of the *The Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror*.

November 28th – December 13th, 1959

The French government organises a trip for 13 ABSW members to visit its Sahara Desert colonial military and mining installations in Algeria and Mauritania. John Maddox, at the time ABSW chair and science correspondent for *The Manchester Guardian*, later recalls the trip's high point being visiting an 'astonishing ridge of pure magnetite'. Former ABSW chair Ritchie Calder, also on the trip, seemingly scoops everyone by filing a story about the ridge based on a previous visit. *The Daily Mail's* Hugh McLeave demands Calder be expelled. Instead, Maddox and McLeave go together to a nearby village so that a telegrapher can file their stories in time, staying up all night tapping them out by Morse code. Maddox's telegraph accidentally goes to London, Ontario, while Calder had filed his story by airmail, meaning McLeave gets the scoop.

November 16th, 1966

The ABSW holds its first awards ceremony, sponsored by the drug company Glaxo. Just two prizes are awarded, the national and regional 'fellowships'. The national award goes to Anthony Tucker, science correspondent at *The Guardian*. The regional award goes to Bill Mackie, from the Aberdeen *Evening Express*, who goes on to be a Grampian TV news reporter who regularly covers the North Sea oil industry. One of the judges is John Maddox, who has become editor of *Nature*. In years to come the ABSW's relationship with Glaxo comes to rival the depth of its connection with the BA.



Glaxo Fellowships for British Science Writers

THE Glaxo Travelling Fellowships for British science writers were presented at the Surrey Hotel, London, on 16th November to Mr. Anthony Tucker, Science Correspondent of *The Guardian*, and Mr. William Mackie of the Aberdeen *Evening Express*.

The Fellowship for Regional Science Reporting, which went to Mr. Mackie, was a surprise announcement at the dinner. The new award was made, said Sir Alan Wilson, Chairman, Glaxo Group Ltd., "in recognition of the growth of science writing in regional newspapers and journals and the need to assist this encouraging trend."

Earlier in his speech, before presenting the Fellowships, Sir Alan said: "It is a truism that the scientific curriculum of yesterday have become the industrial apparatus of today, and as the business of today become the necessities of tomorrow. If the general populace is not to become bewildered by the pace of the advance, it is essential

The first ever ABSW awards gets coverage in the Glaxo in-house magazine, *The Bulletin*.

Connie St Louis: "My reporting of Professor Tim Hunt's sexist comments cost me everything. My job, my health, and my wellbeing. No journalist should pay that price. My forthcoming book will address some of the issues raised during that time. The [departure] of a scientist as the head of our organisation and the subsequent replacement by 'one of us' is a welcome step in ensuring the autonomy and robustness of the ABSW".



This move was further cemented by naming our award for investigative journalism after Steve Connor, one of the foremost science journalists of our generation. It was a signal that, as well as celebrating science, our job was also to hold it to account with critical reporting.

Mičo Tatalović and our current chair, Andy Extance, moved us to a phase of consolidating the lessons we had learned into a strategic review of the organisation. If we did wish to become a professional body, we would need a plan for how we would gain the skills, capacity and the credibility to manage the grants that would enable us to run large projects.

Andy Extance: "I am privileged to have helped lay out what the ABSW is for as part of our strategic review process in 2018. I encourage all members to see for themselves on: www.absw.org.uk/pages/7-who-we-are



"But our mission puts it clearly: 'We champion independence and excellence in the reporting of science, medicine, engineering and technology'."

Today's ABSW is more like a professional body than a private members' club. Our focus is on helping new people into science writing and assisting them in their professional development.

We are also a more self-confident organisation, one that does not require the approval of the scientific community for its credibility. But as we celebrate the progress we have made in our Diamond Jubilee year, we should ask ourselves whether we have lost something on the way.

Today, fewer senior national journalists and leading titles are actively involved in the ABSW. They are now more closely associated with the Science Media Centre, which provides the on- and off-the-record, privileged briefings that the ABSW once did. When scientific leaders and politicians wish to find out what science journalists are thinking, they ask Fiona Fox rather than the Chair of the ABSW.

Perhaps this is the price of weaning ourselves off elitism, drug company money and the scientific establishment. But if the ABSW is to celebrate its 100th anniversary in some style, we the membership must determine how we remain influential and relevant, and how we continue to be part of the conversation at the highest levels.

Our best option, in my view, is to continue along the path that we have set and, along with our international colleagues, organise and generate our own income streams, to strengthen our community and actively shape our profession.

That is after all what our four founders wanted to do 75 years ago. I believe they would take great delight in what the ABSW is now and what it intends to become.

Pallab Ghosh is ABSW Honorary President and Science Correspondent, BBC News

Winning the ABSW awards

There's a huge amount of talent in contemporary science journalism, which makes judging a pleasurable, as well as formidable, task.

The ABSW's annual awards are the oldest for British science writing. The ABSW hall of fame includes winners such as Sir David Attenborough, Sir John Maddox and Judith Hann.



Former ABSW chair and honorary president and all-round science writing legend Sir John Maddox (left) talks to association stalwart and former *New Scientist* editor Mike Kenward (right). Between them is Brenda Maddox, the ABSW's first female chair.

However, the awards have undergone some dramatic changes since they began in 1966. First won by Anthony Tucker and William Mackie, the then "Glaxo Fellowships for British Science Writers", sponsored by GlaxoSmithKline, were presented "in recognition of the growth of science writing in regional newspapers and journals and the need to assist this encouraging trend".

In 1988, Tom Wilkie, himself a double winner of the Glaxo-ABSW award, reported on the annual ceremony in its 23rd year.

Glaxo SCIENCE WRITERS Fellowships

QUALITY SHINES THROUGH IN THIS YEAR'S GLAXO-ABSW AWARDS

British science writing is getting better, at least if the standard of the entries to this year's Glaxo-ABSW Science Writers Awards is anything to go by.

The purpose of any award scheme is not just to reward excellence, but to encourage higher standards. By this latter criterion, the Awards have been very successful this year. The awards were presented at a lunch which was hosted by Sir Paul Girolami, the chairman of Glaxo.

There were 64 entries, slightly down on last year, but the quality of most of them was very high indeed. The judges were unanimous on one thing: the difficulty of choosing outright winners from a field where the competition was so intense.

One thing which none of us judges realised at the time was the very high proportion of women among the award winners this year. Science is often derided, wrongly in my view, as an exclusively or intrinsically "masculine" activity, so it is interesting and, in my view, a good thing that so much of the best writing and broadcasting about science is being done by women science journalists.

This is the 23rd year in which Glaxo has sponsored these awards. I want to record my personal thanks to the Company for supporting the scheme for this time. And I am sure that I speak for the whole of the ABSW in hoping that they will long continue to do so.

Although the ethos of the awards remains much the same, they have since been reworked. Numerous categories have been added, including Video Story of the Year and the Royal Society Audio Award. Each award is now sponsored by an ABSW Award partner, with the 2021 sponsors including the Association for the British Pharmaceutical Industry and IBM Research Europe.

1966

Shortly after legendary astronomy populariser Patrick Moore joins the ABSW, he gets a letter from the secretary telling him he isn't a science writer in the view of the board. "This struck me as slightly amusing," he later writes, "as by that time I had to my credit around 30 books on scientific matters; more articles than I could count; a series of BBC science scripts, which had begun in April 1957 and had continued monthly ever since in my programme *The Sky at Night*; and a good deal else besides. Under the circumstances I merely chuckled and resigned."

1967

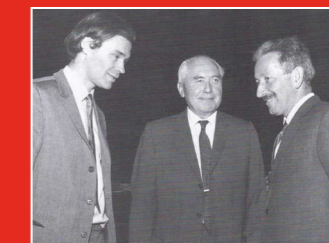
In the ABSW's second Glaxo-sponsored award ceremony, Judith Hann, science correspondent and feature writer for the *Northern Echo*, Darlington, wins the regional award. She then becomes a presenter for the BBC's science and technology show *Tomorrow's World*, staying for 20 years.



Judith Hann won the ABSW's regional award before presenting *Tomorrow's World*.

1970

At the fifth ABSW/Glaxo awards ceremony, the national award goes to Nicholas Wade, then working at *Nature*. Shortly afterwards, Wade moves to the US, and starts work for *Science* in 1972. From 1982 he works at *The New York Times*, being science and health editor from 1990 onwards. The regional award goes to Joe McKiernan from Newcastle's *Evening Chronicle*, who retires as science editor in 1991.



At the ABSW's 1970 awards, *Nature's* Nicholas Wade (left) and Joe McKiernan from Newcastle's *Evening Chronicle* (centre) pose with Glaxo chairman Sir Alan Wilson (right).

With the lunches at the Dorchester hotel still an important part of the ABSW's activities, it hosts Margaret Thatcher, then Secretary of State for Education and Science. She talks on the record about science policy to 30-40 reporters. She is withdrawing free milk given at schools to seven-to-11-year-old children, earning her the nickname "Thatcher, milk snatcher". ABSW chair and *New Scientist* editor Bernard Dixon sits next to Thatcher, and watches as she treats all questions about school milk with contempt. "All of her medical and scientific critics were wrong," Dixon writes when she becomes Prime Minister. "And the rest was just media mischief." Ultimately, Thatcher picks up her handbag and storms out. She later asks for a less formal social get-together – but with control over the list of invitees. Dixon declines.



Margaret Thatcher

The ABSW is one of seven national associations to come together to form the European Union of Science Journalists' Associations, or EUSJA, pronounced to rhyme with 'choicier'. EUSJA seeks to promote interactions between European journalists and scientists, including international visits.

The ABSW/Glaxo awards expand to four categories, now including fellowships for broadcasting and trade and technical writing. There are some familiar names among the recipients. In the final year of his first period as *Nature* editor, former chair John Maddox wins one award. Among the other three recipients are two relatively young science writers. One is Geoffrey Lean, the environment correspondent who today has written for *The Observer*, *New Statesman*, *Daily Mail*, *London's Evening Standard*, *The Independent on Sunday*, and *The Telegraph*. The other is Colin Tudge, who has worked for *Farmers' Weekly*, *New Scientist* and BBC Radio.

2021 Awards

After a landmark year of science journalism, the 2021 awards ceremony took place on 8th July, receiving almost 300 entries across 14 categories. Reporting of the Covid-19 pandemic was the focus of many recognitions, including the coveted Editor of the Year award, which was presented to Fiona Godlee, editor of the *BMJ*.

Judges said of Fiona: "This editor achieved the ultimate accolade of creating editorial that drove a dramatic U-turn in government policy. They took an immediate decision to provide all Covid-related content freely to the whole world, and most important, took the time for relevant information and treatment evaluations to reach doctors down from years to weeks, including partnerships with US labs to help research rush through at preprint stage. There was nothing more that anyone could ask for the title of Editor of the Year. Vision, creativity, leadership, execution and impact were all there in abundance."

Tom Chivers, science editor of *UnHerd*, was announced as the 2021 British Science Journalist of the Year, with judges saying "it's so tough to make statistics sexy. The winner has a good try at it. They stylishly introduce us to the possibilities and pitfalls of a topic we have all become hooked on – disease modelling."

Sabrina Weiss, winner of this year's Newcomer of the Year Award, said "It is really exciting to be recognised like this. I closely follow the writing of my fellow science journalists and am always learning from them, and this award has given me a motivational boost. During the pandemic, I have tried to tell stories centred around people, and this is something I want to focus on in my future journalism."

The Lifetime Achievement Award

The Lifetime Achievement Award celebrates exceptional contributions to the field of science journalism or science writing over a lifetime.

These include:

- Championing independence and excellence in the reporting of science, medicine, engineering or technology
- Communicating science, medicine, engineering or technology and holding these disciplines to account
- Journalistic achievement and impact
- Professional development of colleagues, including mentoring
- Exemplary professional behaviour



Pallab Ghosh presents former *Nature* editor Sir Philip Campbell with the ABSW Lifetime Achievement Award in 2019.

Winners of the ABSW Lifetime Achievement Award

2022 Judith Hann	2013 Dick Ahlstrom
2021 Wendy Barnaby	2012 David Dickson
2020 Robin McKie	2011 Fred Pearce
2019 Philip Campbell	2010 Geoff Watts
2018 Steve Connor	2009 John Gribbin
2017 Andy Coghlan	2005 David Attenborough
2016 Deborah Cohen	2004 Tim Radford

The ABSW Lifetime Achievement Award was first awarded in 2004, to *Guardian* journalist Tim Radford. Radford worked for *The Guardian* for 32 years, mostly as science editor. He is the founding editor of the Climate News Network, a volunteer organisation supporting scientists and journalists who aim to tell people about climate change. He has also been the recipient of four ABSW Science Writer of the Year awards. Radford has often voiced his passion for the communication of science, once stating in a 2011 *Nature* article that

"enthusiasm is infectious, but to command an audience of readers, scientists should exploit their other natural gifts. One of these is training in clarity. Another is training in observation. And a third is knowledge."

Deborah Cohen was the first woman to win the ABSW Lifetime Achievement Award in 2016, for her work as editor of the BBC Radio Science Unit.

2021's winner, Wendy Barnaby, was lauded for her refusal to shy away from controversial topics. An interview with Wendy appears on page 17. In her acceptance speech, she said:

"It's interesting when you read out my list of works to see how varied the activities have been, and that's the thing I love about journalism. You can do all sorts of things under the rubric of journalism and that's what makes it so interesting."



L to R: Glaxo's Sir Richard Sykes presents Aisling Irwin with an ABSW award in 1999; Sir Martyn Poliakoff (right) presents the Royal Society Radio Prize in 2011; Dr Peter Briggs, chief executive of the British Science Association, chats to Philip Wright of Glaxo Wellcome at the ABSW awards in 2000

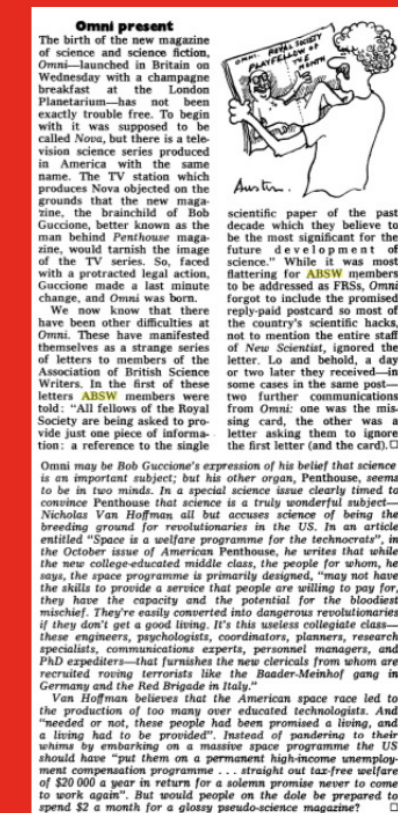
Nature's John Gribbin wins the Glaxo fellowship award for national newspapers and magazines 'largely for his reporting of scientific work on changes in the world's climate'. Judith Hann, science correspondent and feature writer for the *Northern Echo*, again wins the regional award. BBC TV science correspondent David Wilson wins the broadcast award, and Geoff Watts of *World Medicine* wins the trade and technical award. The winners each receive £500, equivalent to £5,500 today, which they must spend on travel for a reporting trip.

July 15th, 1975

ABSW chair Martin Sherwood writes to EUSJA's president to complain about 'mismanagement'. 'Under the circumstances the ABSW could probably best serve its members by disaffiliating from the Union,' he concludes, although it proves to be a hollow threat.

October 4th, 1978

Bob Guccione, publisher of the adult magazine *Penthouse*, launches a science and science fiction magazine called *Omni*. The magazine writes to all ABSW members asking them to name 'the single scientific paper of the past decade which they believe to be the most significant for the future development of science'. However, it mistakenly addresses them as 'fellows of the Royal Society'.



March 8th, 1979

Labour's Shirley Williams, in her last year as Secretary of State for Education and Science, addresses the ABSW luncheon club for the second time in three years. *New Scientist* questions why she came back so soon and criticises this and other aspects of her department's public relations. While the PR team is angry, the consequences are short lived, as Williams loses her parliamentary seat in the election later in the same year.

September 24th, 1980

At an extraordinary general meeting at the Royal Institution a vote defeats a motion to change the ABSW's name to include the word 'technology'.

December 9th, 1980

Brenda Maddox is the ABSW's first female chair, freelance writer, wife of former ABSW chair and Nature editor John Maddox. She writes to the ambassador of the People's Republic of China hoping to organise exchange visits between ABSW members and science journalists in China.

1982

The ABSW holds a party primarily to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the launch of Sputnik I at the German Embassy in London. The invited speaker, radio astronomer Bernard Lovell, praises the attendees for how their coverage helped enable the success of the Jodrell Bank Observatory, of which he was the first director.



The ABSW's 1980s logo

March 12th, 1984

Chemistry writer John Emsley appeals the ABSW board's decision not to make him a full member because he has an academic post that provides 80% of his salary. He argues that he publishes more articles than many full members and wants the kudos that being a full member brings. On July 19th, the secretary Peter Cooper replies regretfully saying that he must remain an associate member but notes that the category definitions need updating.

Tributes and celebrations

Other awards are named after late science journalists who had been valuable members of the ABSW community.

The Steve Connor Award

Steve Connor, science editor of the Independent, won the most ABSW awards of anyone (six), from his first award in 1985 to his posthumous lifetime achievement award in 2018. Following his death in November 2017, the ABSW renamed its Investigative Journalism award in his honour.

The Dr Katharine Giles Award

The Dr Katharine Giles Award for best popular article written by a scientist or engineer has been awarded since 2015. In addition to a £600 cash prize, the winners receive free media training through the Dr Katharine Giles Fund. Giles worked as a climate scientist specialising in sea ice cover and ocean circulation and was an avid science communicator at the forefront of climate research.

European Science Journalist of the Year

This international award was launched in 2014 by the ABSW to celebrate excellence and innovation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics across Europe. It is now supported and part-funded by the ABSW and is presented by the European Federation for Science Journalism (EFSJ).

Previous winners include Ángela Bernardo (Spain, 2022), Hristio Boytchev (Germany, 2021), Maria Pazi (Russia, 2020), Alison Abbott and Katia Moskvitch (UK, 2019), Eva Wolfangel (Germany, 2018), Hester van Santen (the Netherlands, 2017), Michele Catanzaro (Spain/Italy, 2016), Tanja Rudez (Croatia, 2015).

The judges

Judging panels frequently include award winners from the previous year, board members of the ABSW and freelance members of the ABSW.

In recent years, the large number of entries has necessitated the increase of judging panels to more than 20 people. A small group of judges shortlists the entries for each category, before the whole group selects a winner.

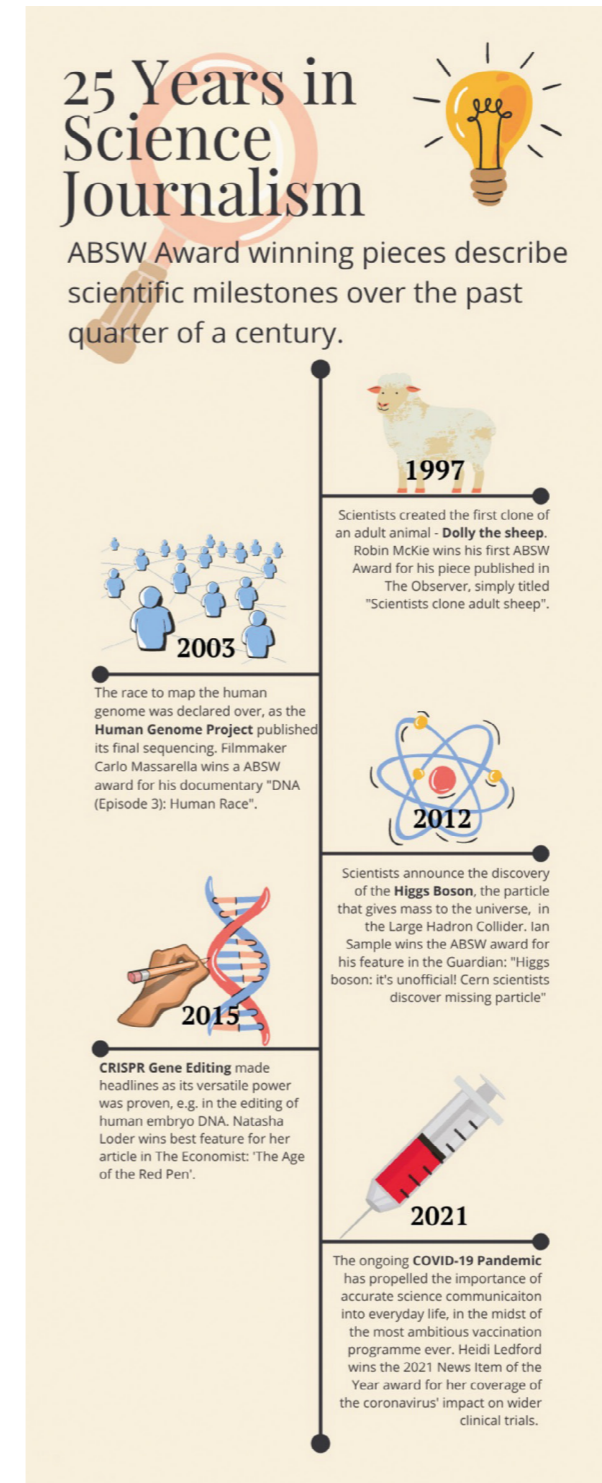
Martin Ince, ABSW Awards chair, said of his experience judging the 2020 awards: "Chairing these awards left me with one overwhelming emotion: amazement at the sheer amount of talent in contemporary UK science journalism. The 265 entries, in every format from blog posts to TV programmes, included many possible winners, providing for an enjoyable but arduous experience for the judges."

Written by Abigail Pinchbeck

Why communicate science?

Science communication is a lot sexier than it was just a few decades ago, thanks to a 1980s report that persuaded scientists and government of its importance.

Since the creation of the ABSW, its members have reported on many of the landmark scientific breakthroughs of the past few decades. But science communication itself has undergone a rapid transformation in the past half a century in the UK, with the introduction of the idea of 'public engagement with science and technology' or PEST; the formation and disbandment of the Committee on the Public Understanding of Science (COPUS); and the introduction of events including British Science Week.



1984

EUSJA's future is under 'intense investigation', according to Brian Ford, the UK representative. The organisation is seeking funds, support from the European Commission and 'a sound raison d'être', Ford writes. The number of organisations with funds to spend on EUSJA visits have become fewer, he notes.

1985

The Royal Society publishes the Bodmer report that leads to the establishment of a Committee on the Public Understanding of Science (COPUS). One of its recommendations is to set up a science news agency to 'distribute copy', but the ABSW resists this idea. It is concerned about the lack of exclusivity, and whether the copy would be interesting enough to be taken up.

Instead, the ABSW and Royal Society set up a joint committee to organise three press briefings in 1986. One discusses the science behind AIDS. Another looks at the health of British science. A third looks at experimentation on living animals. Briefings continue, covering further topics, until at least 1991.

1986

The ABSW/Glaxo awards celebrate their 20th anniversary, adding two special awards for organisations. By this time, the awards have dropped the requirement to spend the prize on a reporting trip. The BBC *Horizon* programme wins the broadcasting prize, while *New Scientist* wins the print prize. *New Scientist* writers Ros Herman and Steve Connor also jointly win the prize for best writer on a trade or technical publication.

Other winners include the BBC's Mike Salisbury and Martin Redfern and Oliver Morton, then still a student at the University of Cambridge, for his writing while an intern at *The Economist*. Morton goes on to be *Nature's* chief news and features editor and *The Economist's* briefings editor.



A very young Oliver Morton (left) gets an ABSW award from Glaxo chairman Sir Paul Girolami (right).

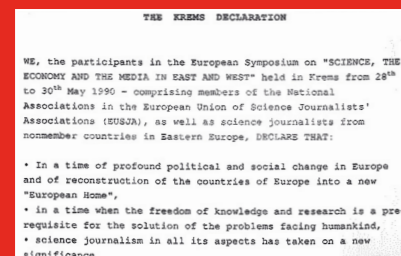
November 3rd, 1987

Glaxo confirms that it will provide the ABSW with £6,500 per year, worth nearly £20,000 per year today, for three years to fund use of the BA's secretarial services. The arrangement continues through to 1999, after which Glaxo's award funding includes a smaller donation for general administration.

May 28th – June 1st, 1990

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall the previous year, EUSJA organises a meeting of science journalists from 22 countries in Eastern and Western Europe in Austria and Hungary.

The attendees draft The Krems Declaration stating that 'in a time of profound and political social change' the 'reporting of science must remain totally independent of financial or political pressures'.



January 6th, 1994

Wendy Barnaby, at the time a freelancer working mainly for BBC radio, reports on the end of her first year as chair at the ABSW's AGM. The number of members exceeds 400 for the first time, and the organisation reports a record number of visits in the past year. Meanwhile, at board meetings, a major topic of discussion is how to use the CompuServe dial-up service to access the internet through telephone lines.

1995

The ABSW begins offering bursaries for graduates starting science journalism courses. Backed financially by the Wellcome Centre for Medical Science, this year four winners each receive £4,200. The bursaries continue for 12 years, with funding shifting directly to the Wellcome Trust, their value reaching £10,000 per bursary for ten winners.

June 24th, 1997

To celebrate the ABSW's 50th anniversary, it hosts an exclusive dinner at the top of the BT Tower in London, which until 1980 had been the UK's tallest building. Richard Stevenson, ABSW chair and *Chemistry World* editor, chooses the invitees. It also runs a more open dinner and reception at the Royal Society on November 12th, sponsored by the Wellcome Trust. Glaxo provides £5,000 to produce an anniversary booklet.

The 1985 Bodmer Report, endorsed by the Royal Society, highlighted the need for people to gain an understanding of science. It is often regarded as the birth of modern science communication.

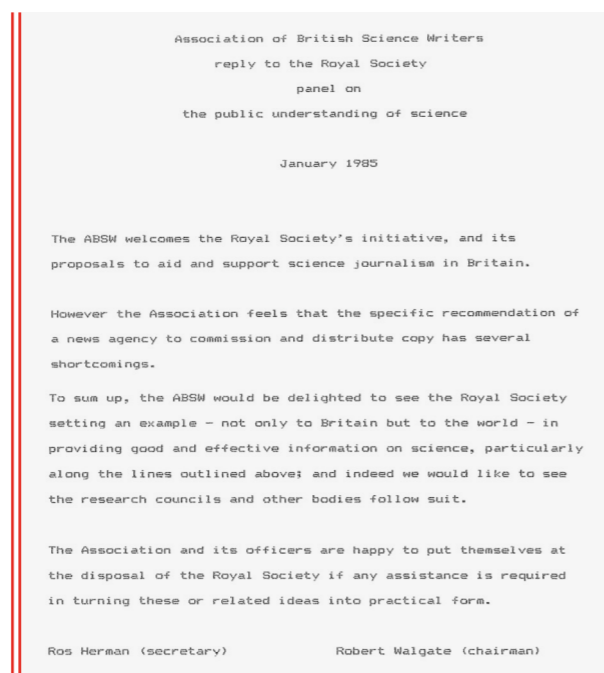
The report noted a lack of public knowledge of science and technology and advocated for an increase in formal science education; a scientific presence in the mass media; and an increase in the ability of scientists to communicate their work to all segments of the public. It underlined the need to increase the level of understanding and contact between scientists and journalists:

'Mechanisms need to be found, therefore, for improving the contact with scientists and the understanding of science, not only by science journalists, but also and perhaps even more importantly by journalists as a whole.'

The report's authors warned that science communication was stigmatised in the academic community and lamented a lack of contact between scientists and the media. The ABSW was recognised as a way to combat this:

'Within the scientific community there is still often a stigma associated with being involved with the media. There is now, however, a substantial body of professional journalists and writers (The Association of British Science Writers, for example, has over 200 members) whose job it is to interpret science and scientists to the lay public.'

The Bodmer report is now widely recognised to be the origin of the Public Understanding of Science movement in the UK, leading to the founding of COPUS, the Committee on the Public Understanding of Science. This committee was a collaboration by the British Association (BA) for the Advancement of Science, the Royal Society and the Royal Institution, aiming to develop the public engagement with science and technology.



The Copus Grant Scheme was developed to provide seed funding for local events and exhibitions as well as national initiatives. The scheme also provided National Science Week grants of up to £3000 for activities and events occurring within Science Week.

COPUS influenced the shape of science writing in the UK. The scheme altered the attitude of the Royal Society, the UK's scientific academy, from one of detachment and aloofness towards science communication to one that actively promoted the public understanding of science. It introduced the Faraday Prize, an annual award given for "excellence in communicating science to UK audiences".

COPUS also supported various other endeavours to increase the public understanding of science. This included a Royal Society Science Writing Competition, with support from *The Daily Telegraph*, as well as Science Media Fellowships offered by the BA. These fellowships provide opportunities for practising scientists and engineers to work closely with the media. Over three decades, 350 working scientists have been given the opportunity to spend time in a media outlet such as *The Guardian* or the BBC.

Following the COPUS example, the BA proposed to hold Britain's first Science Week in 1994. Funded by the science ministry, this was to be the first public science event to receive government funding, marking the beginning of the government's support for COPUS and PEST alike. Now, British Science Week is a successful event held annually across the UK, providing a platform to support STEM professionals, science communicators and the public to engage in STEM activities.

As science communication developed, more organisations became involved in PEST and COPUS became obsolete. The body was relaunched as the Copus Council in 2000, as a more inclusive partnership for UK science communication. In June 2002, Dame Bridget Ogilvie resigned as Chair of the Copus Council, which was then discontinued following a report by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. In a memorandum Ogilvie said that

"I have no problem with the current activities that occupy the time of Copus staff—it is simply that Copus Council does not need to exist for them to take place".

In 2000, the Science Media Centre (SMC), based at the Royal Institution, was established to work together with scientists and journalists to improve science communication in the media. And in 2003, Lord Dick Taverne founded Sense about Science (SaS), an independent charity aiming to promote public interest in sound science. The organisation stresses the need for evidence to be placed at the heart of public discussion surrounding science, in an age of misinformation and the internet.

Science Communication in the 21st Century

The Bodmer Report stated that: 'Many personal decisions, for example about diet, vaccination, personal hygiene or safety at home and at work, would be helped by some understanding of the underlying science'. This seems ever pertinent today in a society which requires its citizens to make informed choices surrounding the Covid-19 vaccine. Uptake within the UK has generally been high, and the influence that

1999

ABSW chair Pete Wrobel, managing editor at *Nature*, registers the organisation's first website, www.absw.org.uk, which comes with unlimited free email addresses for members. It is up and running by the end of the year.

1999

The ABSW hosts a memorable event with American evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, held at the premises of drug company Novartis.

January 25th, 2000

The National Gallery hosts a spectacular ABSW awards ceremony, hosted by Glaxo's Peter Goodfellow. "Very generous with the wine he was too," recalls Pete Wrobel. "Something like 120 or 140 people sat down at tables for a fine dinner. The guest speaker was [geneticist] Paul Nurse, freshly knighted on the back of his Nobel. More than 100 very merry science journalists knocking back quantities of wine surrounded by Titian's wonderful paintings! That's what I call art meets science."



The ABSW's 2000s logo

June 26th, 2000

In the month that scientists made an initial rough draft of the human genome, *The Guardian* publishes a special supplement on the topic. *Science* correspondent James Meek's article 'The X Factor' wins the year's award for 'best feature on a science subject in a national or regional newspaper'.

This is one of six categories in this year's awards.

January 24th, 2001

At its AGM, the ABSW appoints its first female honorary president, Dame Bridget Ogilvie. Ogilvie is a parasitologist who joined the Wellcome Trust in 1981, serving as its director from 1991-1998.

December 2001

According to the ABSW newsletter, *The Science Reporter*, "An ad hoc group of international science journalists has proposed to establish a world federation of science journalists (WFSJ)".

The executive committee is sceptical. "We cannot see the point of a World Federation of Science Journalists, unless it is an excuse for a few people to travel around the world at someone else's expense," outgoing chair Pete Wrobel tells TSR.

May 2002

After two years of debate involving the ABSW and its members, the Royal Society drops a set of guidelines intended to prevent misleading science coverage. The noble intention had been to address poor coverage of topics such as genetically modified animals, and the historically significant debate over the combined measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccines.

According to *The Science Reporter* "The guidelines were published earlier this year by the Royal Society, Royal Institution and the Social Issues Research Centre. The aim was to raise perceived low standards in the reporting of science and health.

The effect though was to alienate large sections of the science and health press – and reinforce the view that the learned bodies are still naive in their assessment of the news media in particular."

Exclusive ABSW torpedoed guidelines

The ABSW has learned that the Royal Society is to quietly drop its backing for the recently published and much revised guidelines for journalists covering science and health stories. Instead the Royal Society is considering proposals by the ABSW to produce radical new guidelines for scientists and science communicators. The dramatic U-turn was bought about, in part, by campaigning by the ABSW. A Royal Society insider said "it was a tactical mistake not to get the endorsement of the ABSW before publishing the guidelines."

name suggests, the aim of SUBTM is to produce a different document on science communication. The document will not be guidelines. Instead it aims to process that will enable the community to understand workings of the various models of best practice. The document provides, underestimates and deal with the complexities of poor and inaccurate reporting. SUBTM will aim to pick itself from existing a

Improving science coverage is far from easy.

PEST has had on this reality should not be overlooked.

The 21st century saw drastic changes in the world of science journalism as the internet, podcasting and blogging transformed the field.

Sue Nelson, creator and host of the award-winning podcast Space Boffins, spoke about her 18-year experience in science journalism and podcasting alongside her husband, Richard Hollingham.

"When I started science journalism, submitting articles to The Guardian, I was working on a computer with limited processing power and the internet was barely a thing. Even before that I would have to submit my stories via a typewritten article in the post rather than by email. When I started making radio programmes and doing audio, podcasts didn't exist."

"Podcasts are a brilliant way of taking content to a broader audience. I've been amazed at the number of teenagers that say they wouldn't dream of listening to BBC Radio 4, but they will listen to a Radio 4 programme on a podcast."

Natasha Loder, co-host of The Economist podcast The Job, spoke about why people often prefer listening to a podcast than reading an article: *"I think that from a listener perspective, you get something that's enjoyable in a different way. You can be washing up and listening to it. It's a slower, less demanding form of news."*

Technology has however brought some problems to science communication, with its focus increasingly shifting towards battling misinformation. The ABSW's mini-series *'Don't Be Fooled'* explored how to combat problems caused by technology, how to encourage members to analyse information and how to ask better questions. The series included sessions on understanding data, recognising deep fakes and dealing with artificial intelligence.

Written by Abigail Pinchbeck

The bursaries that boosted the profession

A generation of talented science graduates used bursaries to realise their dreams of studying the communication of science – and they then showed media organisations how useful it is to hire specialist science journalists.

The Association of British Science Writers' full bursaries for postgraduate education were pivotal for some in establishing science journalism as a career. The bursaries, which were offered between 2001 and 2007, led to more recognition in newsrooms that science stories – and specialised science reporters – were important for delivering this type of coverage.

These bursaries were the result of a collaboration between ABSW and Wellcome, a science funder then known as The Wellcome Trust. They comprised a £10,000 grant to fund prospective postgraduate students, specifically those with undergraduate degrees in science, pursuing master's degrees in science communication. The bursary could be taken in full to cover a full-time course, or over the course of three years to help individuals studying part-time. By 2006, the bursary scheme had expanded to offer seven grants for full-time study and two for part-time.

Stuart Clark, astronomy journalist and former vice chair of ABSW, oversaw the bursary scheme. He believes that, when dealing with science stories, a solid understanding of the subject matter is particularly important. He explained the necessity of promoting science journalists with existing science backgrounds.

"I think it's very easy to misunderstand what science is, and how it works, if you haven't studied science yourself," Clark said.

"Making it possible for science graduates to be taught journalism skills gives them the best of both worlds."

A Wellcome finding

A report published by The Wellcome Trust in 2000, entitled *The Role of Scientists in Public Debate*, explored scientists' participation in communications and their approach when talking to the media and the public. Through interviewing over 1,600 scientists, the report found that most scientists thought that they held responsibility to communicate research results to non-scientists – but only a minority felt equipped to do this. Three in four scientists regarded a lack of public knowledge or interest in science as a barrier to public understanding of science while an overwhelming majority of scientists had not received any training in liaising with the media or the public.

The report concluded that more support and encouragement was necessary for scientists to improve the quality and quantity of communication. The ABSW Wellcome bursaries were established shortly after the report was published, to help those educated in science to enter journalism.

May 2nd, 2002, 4pm-6pm

In the same month, the recently-established Science Media Centre (SMC) holds a meeting entitled "MMR: Learning Lessons". Housed at the Royal Institution, the SMC seeks to provide journalists with an extra route to contact media-friendly scientists, led by director Fiona Fox.

ABSW member and then SMC Science Information Officer Mark Peplow later writes in *The Science Reporter* that while most people at the meeting pushed for openness and transparency in coverage, a significant minority argued that too much information paralysed the public.

Whichever argument scientists want to make, they had to be 'more media savvy', he adds. "[I]f the scientific community feels that there is insufficient media scrutiny on bad research, then the fastest way to change that is to engage with the media and to point this out," Peplow writes.

March 5th, 2003

BBC science correspondent Pallab Ghosh, who has taken over as ABSW chair from Pete Wrobel in 2002, tells the executive committee of signs that the long link to Glaxo is at risk. One contact at the company, which changed its name to GSK in 2000, indicates that it will continue support. A more senior contact, meanwhile, says it will not. By November GSK has confirmed that it will halve its contribution and cease support in 2004. The committee suggests inviting science publicist Sallie Robins to act as a fundraiser.



ABSW chair Pallab Ghosh gives Ben Goldacre one of the final awards to be sponsored by GSK in 2003.

April 2004

With the SMC now linking journalists to scientists, the ABSW changes tack for its events. Responding to member feedback, it decides to focus on professional issues. The first such briefings cover basic editorial skills including writing for the web, freelancing, a networking and mentoring event, and science coverage on television.



Wendy Grossman explains how to write browser-friendly copy at an ABSW workshop in 2004.

October 4th-8th 2004

ABSW chair Pallab Ghosh attends the fourth annual World Conference of Science Journalists in Montreal, organised by the World Federation of Science Journalists. He goes along 'wondering what the point of the meeting was' but comes away convinced that the WFSJ could do a better job of supporting critical science journalism than many national organisations. He recommends to the executive board that the ABSW should join.



ABSW chair Pallab Ghosh meets Veronique Morin, the President of the World Federation of Science Journalists, in Montreal.

October 7th, 2005

After being postponed due to terrorist bombings in London, the ABSW holds its annual awards dinner at the Royal Society. Agricultural science firm Syngenta takes over as sponsor from GSK, but with no donation to ABSW's administrative costs. Extra support comes from the Medical Research Council and Royal Society. *The Guardian's* Tim Radford receives a new lifetime achievement award over the telephone from a family meal in France.

July 19th, 2006

The highlight of this year's Syngenta/MRC/Royal Society-sponsored awards is a lifetime achievement award for Sir David Attenborough. ABSW chair Ted Nield, editor of *The Geologist*, calls him "the country's most distinguished broadcaster". Other notable winners include Ben Goldacre for "The best feature on a science subject in a national or regional newspaper" and a team from *SciDev.Net* for "The best science journalism on the World Wide Web".



Sir David Attenborough entertains the ABSW at the Royal Society.

Master's courses provided a relatively new pathway into a career in science journalism. Science communication MScs often include teaching key skills in journalism, from a science perspective. The ABSW hoped that training those with science degrees in communications would increase the overall quality of science journalism in the UK.

"We needed to push to create a better conversation around science in all its shapes and forms," said Clark. "And what better way to do that than to find science graduates who were interested in journalism, to become the bridge between the scientific world and the general public?"

Wendy Barnaby, who was chair of ABSW when the bursaries were introduced, said that they were one of her proudest achievements.

The bursaries helped increase the popularity of science communication master's courses, whose prevalence has increased over the past few decades. In 1991, the UK's first MSc course in science communication was launched at Imperial College London, with an initial intake of just 21 students. Now, there are at least ten universities in the UK that offer postgraduate diplomas in science communication and related courses.

Many of the recipients of the Wellcome Trust-ABSW bursaries went on to become some of the most well-known names in science journalism today. Victoria Gill, who received a bursary to study science communication at the University of the West of England (UWE) in 2004, now works as science and environment correspondent for the BBC. Gill wrote and presented the ABSW award-winning *In the Shadow of Chernobyl* documentary in 2019.

Part-time success

The option to study part-time was particularly important for some students, including Gill. "The bursary meant that I could afford the fees without having to take out a student loan on top of a student loan," she said.

Gill said taking your first steps into science journalism after studying science can be daunting. "The media can be a bit of an impenetrable box. I didn't know anyone who worked as a TV journalist or for a national newspaper," she said. "Having tutors who were freelance writers and worked for magazines helped to shed light on how to take the first steps to work in that world. I don't think a science communication master's degree is essential for everybody, but I think it was a really important grounding and jumping off point for me."

Another recipient of the bursary, Hayley Bennett, used the funding to study a part-time MSc in science communication, also at UWE, in 2006. Despite initially thinking that a career that combined her two loves – writing and science – was unfeasible, she found the bursary helped her to do it.

"When I saw that UWE, just on my doorstep, ran a course in science communication, which included science writing, I knew I had to apply," said Bennett. "When I started studying at UWE, it really opened my eyes up to different aspects of science communication that I had never thought of, and I ended up working on a number of science audio and sci-arts projects."

Bennett has since written for *New Scientist*, *Nature* and *BBC Focus*, and helped organise the science-themed online music festival and podcast Geek Pop.

Skills for the future

The bursaries ended in 2007, after the ABSW decided that incentives to study science communication diplomas had become much less necessary. The significance of, and need for, these master's qualifications is now self-evident.

"When the bursaries began, it was quite an odd idea for scientists to do these conversion MScs," Clark added. "As the fruits of the investment started to pay off, other cohorts coming up behind these science communicators saw that route as viable, a good career choice, and naturally just sort of gravitated into those kinds of degrees."

The skills taught in these courses continue to prove highly valuable. In an era of misinformation and miscommunication, it is important to ensure the media is science-educated, and that science journalists have a factual understanding of the science they report on. The competition for inches, or indeed clicks, in news has never been greater, which can lead to over-sensationalised headlines and inaccurate representation of science.

"In this modern era, it seems to be vital that we lead the charge to demonstrate good factual knowledge," says Clark.

Abigail Pinchbeck

Out of the pub and into the media

An ABSW student journalism bursary brought confidence, not to mention financial support, to Victoria Gill

The thing that baffles me about the media is how to get in. From the first time I started talking about science writing and broadcasting as a career aspiration, I have continually been told that it's tough and competitive. But I have but never been offered much advice on how to crack it. I think the ABSW might be in a better position than biology lecturers and careers advisers to help me to figure this out.



Victoria Gill, for *The Science Reporter*. Newsletter for the Association of British Science Writers. April/May 2005

Bursaries for potential science writers

Applications are invited for the Wellcome Trust-ABSW bursaries. These competitive bursaries are intended to assist science graduates to undertake postgraduate training in journalism or science communication. Applicants should be British or Irish nationals undertaking an approved course within the British Isles.

The Science Reporter April 2001

Money for media studies

Now a science graduate who wants to embark on a career in the media? Any day now there will be the official launch of this year's media bursaries awarded by the ABSW with funding from the Wellcome Trust. The scheme support science graduates who want to undertake postgraduate training in journalism or science communication on an approved course within the British Isles. Worth £10,000, the bursaries are open to applicants who are British or Irish nationals. Closing date 31 May. Details of how to apply are available on the ABSW

web site or from the office. This year we also hope to offer bursaries to people who are studying part time.

On a similar theme, if you know a scientist is interested in working with the media, before you hand them a copy of the infamous communications guidelines, you could suggest that they apply for one of this year's Media Fellowships, administered by the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

As the BA says: "Go on an eight-week field trip to discover Britain's science media in its own habitat." Closing date 30 April. More details on the BA's web site. (See ABSW site for links.)

The Science Reporter March 2002

January 17th, 2007

At the AGM at the Geological Society, freelance science writer and ABSW treasurer Martin Ince reports that the organisation's finances are in a perilous state. Having made losses of £10,064 in 2004, £8,854 in 2005 and £6,696 in 2006, ABSW has just £4,882 in its balance sheet. Things are made worse still by the fact the Wellcome Trust bursary scheme is due to end this year. The situation prompts cost-cutting moves including moving *The Science Reporter* newsletter from print to online and providing less food and booze at parties.

February 20th, 2007

The ABSW board hears a proposal from former chair Pallab Ghosh that it should host the sixth World Conference of Science Journalists (WCSJ) in London in 2009. *SciDev.Net's* Julie Clayton develops the proposal, which looks promising. The board agrees to support the bid, if the ABSW isn't exposed to any risk. Clayton, Ghosh and Clive Cookson from the *Financial Times* make the bid at the fifth WCSJ held in Melbourne, Australia, in April, beating a rival bid from Trieste, Italy.

April 2007

At the World Conference of Science Journalists in Melbourne, Australia, ABSW board member Lionel Milgrom meets with William Odinga Balikudembe from the Ugandan Science Journalists' Association (USJA). The meeting initiates a twinning arrangement between the ABSW and USJA.



ABSW board member Lionel Milgrom meets with William Odinga Balikudembe from the Ugandan Science Journalists' Association in Melbourne, Australia.

March 19th, 2008

The ABSW cancels its awards for the first time in over 40 years due to lack of sponsorship. "Our last hope of obtaining sufficient sponsorship was snuffed out yesterday morning, and in view of the level of interest in the subject we are losing no time in telling people the sad news," writes ABSW chair Ted Nield. "As the ABSW does not have the reserves to run the scheme without a sponsor, we have no choice but to cancel." He writes that the ABSW hopes to resume the awards in 2009 at the London WCSJ.

June 4th, 2009

A chill runs through the UK science writing community, as a preliminary libel judgement goes against one-time ABSW member Simon Singh. The British Chiropractic Association sues Singh for criticising the treatments it had promoted. Later the same month he tells a press conference at the Science Media Centre that he intends to appeal the verdict. Meanwhile, campaign group Sense About Science petitions to keep libel out of scientific debates, attracting support from famous names from Ricky Gervais to Richard Dawkins to Stephen Fry.

June 29th – July 3rd, 2009

The ABSW successfully runs the World Conference of Science Journalists at Central Hall Westminster, London. The very many highlights include future Pulitzer Prize winner Ed Yong receiving the ABSW's "Best Newcomer" award under the watchful eye of Dippy the Diplodocus in the Natural History Museum's main hall. Thanks primarily to co-directors Julie Clayton and Sallie Robins the ABSW makes an £81,157 surplus that returns its finances to a comfortable position. The conference also sees Natasha Loder, then science and technology correspondent at *The Economist*, take over as chair from Ted Nield.

April 15th, 2010

The British Chiropractic Association withdraws its libel case against Simon Singh, leaving Singh with £200,000 of costs. While Singh's criticism is allowed to stand, the case serves as strong evidence of problems with UK libel law.

July 23rd, 2010

After the success of the WCSJ the previous year, the ABSW runs a standalone UK Conference of Science Journalists at the Royal Society, again produced by Julie Clayton and Sallie Robins. The condensed event format proves attractive, and so the ABSW decides to run it every other year, continuing to this day.

The 2010 conference also includes a newly revived award ceremony, thanks to a five-year deal with Johnson & Johnson Pharmaceutical Research & Development.

'Your reader is your boss'

Women chairs give their tips on science journalism

For the first 50 years of the ABSW's existence, it was dominated by men—reflecting the worlds of science and science journalism. Since the 1990s, the Association has started to become more gender-equal, and the ABSW has taken an active part in increasing the gender diversity of science journalism in the UK. Wendy Barnaby and Natasha Loder, who have both chaired the ABSW, talk about their experiences.

Comments have been edited for brevity and clarity.

Wendy Barnaby is a freelance science journalist who has written for *Nature*, *New Scientist* and the *Times Higher*. She chaired the ABSW from 1993-1995 and was the second woman to chair the Association, preceded only by Brenda Maddox.

Barnaby is a seasoned judge of the ABSW's annual awards for science journalism. Her book, *The Plague Makers*, gives an introduction to biological warfare for the general audience. Last July, she won the ABSW Lifetime Achievement Award.



Wendy Barnaby

How did you begin working with the ABSW?

It was Pearce Wright, the science editor of *The Times*, who nudged me in that direction. At the time, I didn't know what being a member involved, but I thought well, I'll have a go!

How did you become chair?

I was on the committee, and Pearce nominated me for chair. And that was it!

Is there a particular moment while working with ABSW that stands out for you?

I was very pleased that we managed to set up the Wellcome bursaries. They give science graduates an opportunity to go on to science communication courses. There weren't nearly as many science journalists then as there are now, and science was not really valued by newsrooms very much. Political science stories still got taken over by political reporters. The idea [of the Wellcome bursaries] was to bring the two communities together. The scheme went so well that it led to the setting up of the full bursary scheme, on a grander scale, in 2001.

How would you say that science journalism has changed over the years?

Scientists used to be terribly snuffy about the media. I've done a lot of media training of scientists and back in those days, they didn't really see why they should lower themselves to talk to journalists. I think the biggest change has been on the part of scientists, and the communication between scientists and journalists. These days, all scientists accept that they should be talking to the media, and they accept that this is actually a skill.

It's become much more obvious to scientists that they need to communicate their science, as the public needs to understand those issues. They now know that they need to speak in a language that readers will understand, or at least that journalists can easily translate.

How has the ABSW changed?

It has become much more high profile – it has joined up with other science journalists in Europe, it's become more of a presence. Goodness me, to think what we used to do – we used to have long lunches! We used to invite our guests and just interview them over lunch. Those days are well and truly gone. These days we have the science journalist conferences. We've introduced 'Science Journalist' as a job – a specialisation. We recognise the various bits of being a science journalist. There wasn't really much education in science journalism back in those days but there is now – like specialised university courses in science journalism and science communication. I have taught on the MSc at Imperial College London up until this year. These sorts of courses didn't exist back then.

How was your experience being a judge for the Awards?

It's really interesting. The quality of science journalism these days is really high, and it's brilliant to read and watch and listen to some of the things that are produced. It's almost humbling. It's very encouraging and uplifting to be exposed to such good work. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

You've worked in many countries across the world, from Scandinavia to China. Where was your favourite place to live/work?

I very much enjoyed working in America in the 1980s. In those days, scientists in the UK were not nearly as happy and well prepared to talk to the press as those in America were. The university press officers were absolutely my favourite people to talk to and ask for stories. The scientists themselves were very happy to talk and would speak very eloquently about their science.

What are you proudest of in your career?

Probably the essay I wrote for *Nature* about water wars. It was controversial because everybody accepted that water wars were a thing. I think it's partly because of the neatness of the phrase 'Water Wars'. In fact, it's far more complicated and the complications were pointed out by an academic called Tony Allan. He died recently, but it was really his work that I was highlighting. I was very pleased to be able to do that.

What do you think is the best piece of advice that you could give to an aspiring science communicator?

Your reader is your boss. You are writing for your reader and that's who you have to concentrate on.

Also, as a subsidiary, it is not a shameful thing to take a particular angle on a story. We angle our communications with each other all the time. We do it out of necessity, and so as not to bore the people we are talking to. Out of the pool of facts that we could transmit to somebody on a particular subject, we choose those facts that are appropriate for the situation – that's what we're doing when we angle stories. I think it's a shame when people think that because we do that, we're somehow dishonest and sleazy, when in fact it's just a normal thing that everybody does.

May 3rd, 2011

The ABSW holds a special general meeting at City University, London, convened by freelance broadcaster and ABSW chair Connie St Louis, approving new articles of association.

The ABSW becomes a company limited by guarantee, meaning that the board is no longer liable for any debts that it incurs.

July 13th, 2011

Prime Minister David Cameron announces the Leveson Inquiry into 'the culture, practices and ethics of the press'. In the course of his opening statement in mid-November that year, Robert Jay, counsel to the inquiry, mentions that "members of the scientific community may be providing the Inquiry with evidence along the lines that much real harm is done by certain sections of the Press who, it is said, do not always apply the scientific method to their reports or commentaries upon subjects of topical scientific interest".

Nature urges scientists to use the Leveson inquiry as an "opportunity to fight back against the agenda-driven reporting". The Science Media Centre also makes recommendations, including broadening who can officially file complaints about science stories.

November 9th-10th 2012

The ABSW funds two early career science journalists, Harriet Bailey, now a science documentary producer, and Smitha Mundasad, now a BBC health reporter and presenter, to join with the ABSW's twin association to attend the Ugandan Science Journalists Forum. Earlier in the year, one Ugandan representative had attended the UK Conference of Science Journalists. Three were supposed to attend, but only one could get a visa.



In 2012, the ABSW's Harriet Bailey and Smitha Mundasad joined the Ugandan Science Journalists Forum.

April 25th, 2013

England passes the Defamation Act 2013, making it harder for people to sue for libel and limiting the likely costs incurred. The change follows a major campaign for reform by those affected by such cases, including Simon Singh and *Nature*.

March 29th, 2014

At the EUSJA general assembly in Vienna, Austria, Connie St Louis, now the ABSW's European Representative, notes an ongoing lack of governance and financial control. On April 9th, the ABSW board therefore decides to leave EUSJA, and explore setting up an alternative organisation.

June 9th, 2015

At a "Luncheon with Female Scientists and Engineers" at the 9th World Conference of Science Journalists in Seoul, Korea, Nobel Prize-winning British biochemist Sir Tim Hunt makes a series of sexist comments. Board member and former chair Connie St Louis reports his comments on Twitter, attracting great attention, and then intense personal criticism.

On June 30th the ABSW board publishes a statement supporting St Louis. "The ABSW should if possible avoid turning itself into the story," says Martin Ince, who was chair at the time. "But just sometimes, we have to stick up for values such as the freedom to report. We must never compromise on this obligation, and we emerged from this apparent problem as a stronger organisation."

June 25th 2015

The ABSW trials its first Science Journalism Summer School, held at the Royal Society.

It targets new science writers and those returning to the profession, and is intended to take place in the years when the biennial UK Conference of Science Journalists does not take place.

The event proves a success and becomes a regular part of the ABSW's events calendar. The ABSW also holds its Johnson & Johnson-sponsored award ceremony at the Royal Society that evening.

Natasha Loder is an award-winning science journalist, currently working as Health Policy Editor at *The Economist*. She chaired the ABSW in 2009-10, introducing the biennial UK Conference of Science Journalists and ABSW's annual science-writing awards.

Over her two-decade long career at *The Economist*, she has also worked as science and technology correspondent, winning awards from the June L. Biedler Prize for Cancer Journalism, and from the Medical Journal Association. She is now the co-host of the coronavirus vaccine podcast *The Jab for The Economist*.



Natasha at the end of her time as chair of the ABSW, in 2011.

Why did you first want to become a science journalist?

I was doing a PhD in theoretical insect ecology. It didn't seem like it was going anywhere; I realised I'd always wanted to be a journalist and that I liked finding out about science things and telling stories, not so much the tedious research bit. Having remembered that I'd actually wanted to be a journalist when I was a teenager, I put two and two together and found science journalism.

The BBSRC (Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council) ran a media training course for scientists, led by Tim Radford, who was amazing. I realised I didn't just want to be a scientist who communicates, I wanted his job!

How did you come to chair the ABSW?

I found the Association really important while I was starting up, and I'd always supported it. I had been on the committee, and I'd written 'So you want to be a Science Writer?'. The Association helped me get some of my first breaks, through the ABSW newsletter. [The journalist] Michael Kenward was really supportive when I was a PhD student. He got me to join the ABSW and I just felt welcome. I felt the need to give back to this organisation, and I thought it was also an opportunity to make a difference.

You made a lot of changes to the ABSW during your time as chair, such as introducing the biennial conferences and the Awards ceremonies. What are you proudest of achieving during your time as chair?

When I look back, I do feel like the ABSW was at a fork in the road, and that I set it on the right path, seeing what it needed to become. It annoyed me when journalists would ask me "Why should I join the ABSW?" with an air of resentment. They'd want me to sell it to them and my goal was to make the reasons for joining self-evident: because it would do things for you that were really useful.

There was a lot I changed, and the thing I was most proud of was the Awards. One of the problems the ABSW was facing was losing sponsorship for the flagship awards. It was thought at the time that we needed big-name sponsors to run the Awards. But as a journalist for *The Economist*, there was no way I was going to go round all the pharmaceutical companies, cap in hand. So, I sat down and calculated the income we got from membership and set a tiny budget for the awards: we could do three prizes and a small reception. The big issue at the time was dealing with all the applications but I felt I had reasserted control over the Awards and was really pleased about that.

What made you recognise the need for a UK specific conference of science journalists?

After the world conference in 2009, Pallab Ghosh said, "Have you thought of doing a UK conference?" Clearly the conference demonstrated that there was a huge demand for getting together, and that the UK was a great place for a science journalism conference. Once we'd proven that the London conference was a success, it seemed a no-brainer to do an ABSW conference which would also help me answer the question of "Why should I join the ABSW?", because it allowed us to discuss the nature of science journalism, and provide continuing education.

At the time, the tools and techniques of journalism were changing quite rapidly. When I started in journalism, you could do a bit of media law, and a bit of shorthand and you were good to go. As time went on the digital tools, whether for podcasting, Twitter or data journalism, became more integral to our work. It became clear that journalists wanted to come together and learn.

You joined the campaign to change Britain's libel laws while chair of the ABSW. Could you tell me more about this?

I had been working on a story about someone in Papua New Guinea's government who was manufacturing fake certificates of carbon offset. There was much more that I was finding out than I could get into *The Economist*, so I was blogging about this on my blog *Overmatter*. I got a really threatening legal letter from one of the firms I'd mentioned and because it was done in my own time, I wasn't legally protected by *The Economist*. Sense about Science found out that I was in a bit of a spot. It became one of the case studies that was presented to the government of why the libel laws needed to change, because current law could effectively silence people from writing about stuff like this. My case study became part of this and I was asked by PEN to become one of their journalists as part of their campaign.

What do you consider to be the biggest achievement in your career?

It's so hard to pick! I think covering the birth of the new space era is one highlight. We're seeing Virgin Galactic go up right now; I was at the first launch and I met Elon Musk there. He said that hybrid rockets are not the way to get into space. The carbon credit work I did was recognised by the UN correspondent's association and I got a prize from Ban Ki-moon so that was definitely a career highlight. And I would say that the pandemic has been another, clearly there is going to be no other story like that in my career.

What's the best piece of advice you could give an aspiring science journalist?

Take any first job in journalism, even if it's not science journalism. It's a lot easier to move sideways in journalism than it is to get your first job, and once you've proven you can be a journalist, the issue of what you write about is something else entirely. Good science writing is a skill, so if you're good at it, it shouldn't be a problem to find good stories to write about. My first jobs were in research policy and then education policy and I always wanted to be a science journalist, but I also wanted to be a journalist. I think if you're too narrow about what you take then you could be waiting a long time, it's quite a small pool.

And join the ABSW of course! It's such good networking and I met so many people and colleagues through the ABSW.

Interviews by Abigail Pinchbeck

July 23rd, 2016

In place of its usual UK Conference of Science Journalists, the ABSW runs the 3rd European Conference of Science Journalists in Manchester, as a satellite event of the EuroScience Open Forum. In the evening, the conference attendees travel by coach to the iconic radio telescopes of Jodrell Bank for the ABSW's annual award ceremony at the bluedot Festival.

There, Deborah Cohen, editor of the BBC Radio Science unit, becomes the first woman to win the ABSW's Lifetime Achievement Award. Then, science journalists go on to mingle with the festival crowd, enjoying music by the likes of neuroscience and epigenetics PhD Sam Shepherd, performing as Floating Points, DJ Shadow, Air and Jean-Michel Jarre.



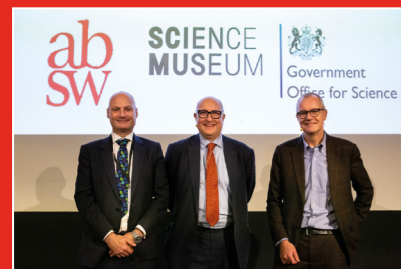
In 2016, the ABSW held its awards among the telescopes at Jodrell Bank.

May 2nd, 2017

ABSW chair and *New Scientist* environment and life sciences news editor Mićo Tatalović proposes an independent strategic review of the ABSW. The review is in two parts. In the first, the MemberWise network surveys ABSW members and reviews the activities the ABSW offers. In the second, honorary president Pallab Ghosh convenes a group of funders and senior science journalists to discuss their views on the organisation's governance and purpose. The group makes 18 recommendations.

November 28th, 2018

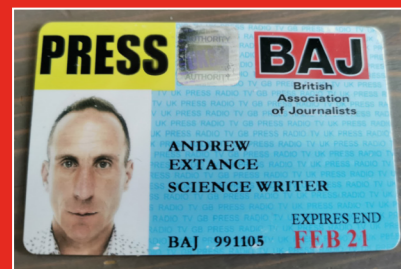
November 28th, 2018 – Organised by board member Bob Ward, policy and communications director of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change, the ABSW joins with the Science Museum to host a discussion with the new government chief scientific advisor Patrick Vallance.



ABSW board member Bob Ward, Roger Highfield, Science Museum Director of External Affairs and Dr Patrick Vallance, Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK Government, at the Science Museum Sun Lates in November 2018. Image credit: Science Museum.

January 21st, 2019

The ABSW finally makes press cards available to its members in partner with the British Association of Journalists, something that its freelance members have long wanted.



Then-treasurer Andy Extance gets the first press card issued via the ABSW.

March 20th, 2019

At the Wellcome Trust ABSW chair Mićo Tatalović and honorary president Pallab Ghosh present the strategic review's results to the ABSW AGM.

The event reveals which recommendations the board is and is not accepting, shaping the course of the ABSW's future. As part of the process which started in 2017, the ABSW devises a new vision, mission and logo.

This makes it clear that the ABSW is a broadly welcoming organisation. "We are an association for media professionals who cover science, medicine, environment, mathematics, engineering and technology," the new mission statement declares.

Pitch slams and parties: the UK science journalism conferences

It might feel like they have been around forever, but the first UK Conference of Science Journalists only happened in 2010.

One of the main events run by the Association of British Science Writers today is the biennial UK Conference of Science Journalists (UKCSJ). This conference gathers the UK's science journalists, including its most prestigious, for professional development and networking. Over the past decade, the UKCSJ has hosted a wide array of influential speakers and panellists, including BBC presenter Evan Davis and Jay Rosen, professor of journalism at New York University.

The Association's foray into the conference world began in 2009, after it won the bid to host the 6th World Conference of Science Journalists (WCSJ) in the UK.

Directed by Julie Clayton, freelance science writer and editor, and Sallie Robins, then the ABSW's finance and membership secretary, the four-day conference took place in Central Hall Westminster, London. Nearly 1000 delegates from almost 50 countries attended the conference, which featured a total of 196 speakers. The events included 'Reporting about Climate Change' and 'From Quantum to Cosmos – New Frontiers in Science'.

The conference finished with a gala reception at the Natural History Museum for the annual ABSW Science Writer Awards ceremony. Conference-goers were also invited on tours through the newly opened Darwin Centre, which safeguards three million plant specimens.

The success of the WCSJ highlighted a clear interest in conferences among British science journalists. The ABSW recognised this interest, and a year later the UKCSJ was born.

There have since been five official UKCSJ conferences and one European Conference of Science Journalists (ECSJ) hosted in the UK by the ABSW.



World Conference of Science Journalists party at the National History Museum, London, in 2009.

The first UKCSJ in 2010 was attended by just 100 delegates. All events took place in one room with only a single events track. But even from this humble start, the conferences tackled the most significant current issues, including sessions exploring Climategate, the future of genomics, and the challenges that freely accessible news brings to science journalism.

The scale of the event has now increased, with delegate numbers reaching more than 300 in recent years. The conferences now consist of multiple parallel tracks running throughout the day.

The second UKCSJ occurred in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry, a landmark investigation examining the "culture, practices and ethics" of the British press. A session entitled 'The Leveson enquiry: an opportunity to dream?' at the UKCSJ2012 saw panellists including Fiona Fox discuss this historic moment, highlighting that effective science journalism requires "reporting where the evidence leads", rather than providing a "false balance".

UKCSJ2012 saw the introduction of Pitch Slams – an opportunity for aspiring freelance science journalists to pitch to experienced editors. The 2012 panel included Helen Pearson, chief features editor at *Nature*; Ehsan Masood, editor of *Research Fortnight*; and James Randerson, science news editor at *The Guardian*. This event even led to the commissioning of a piece by a student science journalist, and the overall success of Pitch Slams meant that they have remained a feature of every conference since.

ECSJ16: A European Expansion

In the summer of 2016, the UKCSJ was expanded to host a wider European audience, as ABSW joined forces with the European Union of Science Journalists' Associations (EUSJA) to hold the UK's first European Conference of Science Journalists in Manchester.

This was the third ever ECSJ and it aimed to promote the discussion of contemporary issues in science journalism, provide skills for newcomers, and encourage an environment of supportive networking. The event was held in Manchester Central, a convention centre in the heart of the city, exhibiting Manchester's reputation as a science hub to an international array of delegates.

All delegates of the conference were also given tickets to Manchester's bluedot music festival at Jodrell Bank Observatory. With a view of the Lovell Telescope, the delegates enjoyed music from the likes of Jean-Michel Jarre and Air, as well as *The Infinite Monkey Cage* – a collaborative science project between comedian Robin Ince and Professor Brian Cox. The festival provided a memorable location for the annual ABSW Science Writers Award ceremony.

Summer Schools

The ABSW organises a smaller Summer School of Science Journalism on alternate years to the conferences. These events are aimed at newcomers and aspiring science journalists. The summer schools focus on developing skills in successful freelancing, mainstream media training, and introducing beginners to the networking world of journalism.



Summer school training

The 2021 Summer School took place fully online, however the organisers worked tirelessly to ensure interactive workshops, panel discussions and networking opportunities would still take place. Sessions included 'Reporting from the frontline of a pandemic' and 'Including diverse voices in science journalism'.

Syriacus Buguzi, a panellist on this year's 'Successful freelancing' session and freelance writer for *SciDev.Net*, spoke about his time on the panel: "The most memorable part of this session was the sharing of experiences. I got to hear experiences from fellow science journalists of diverse backgrounds. With freelancing being such a difficult undertaking, you can at times feel like you are alone on an island. But when you get to hear the experiences of people who have faced the same challenges as you, it leaves you encouraged to soldier on."

As part of its efforts to increase diversity, the ABSW offers free places at conferences and summer schools to help aspiring science journalists in need of support. As part of this year's Summer School, 50 diversity scholarships were offered to those from underrepresented backgrounds.

July 4th, 2019, at 12:15pm

At the 11th World Conference of Science Journalists in Lausanne, Switzerland, members of seven European science journalists' associations meet for the founding general assembly of the European Federation of Science Journalists.

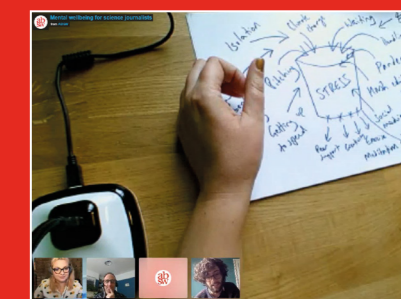
ABSW chair Mićo Tatalović and fellow ABSW board member and freelance editor/writer/producer and former research scientist Anita Makri are elected as EFSJ board members.

October 13th – 15th 2020

The ABSW runs a three-day UK Conference of Science Journalists, forced online by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Chair and freelance science writer Andy Extance and executive secretary Gerri McHugh lead the organisation, with each board member taking responsibility for one session. The conference takes advantage of the new format to broadcast an exclusive online screening for the documentary *Picture a Scientist* and host the annual award ceremony in a live online format.

This is one of many events run online through the pandemic, finally driving the ABSW to provide events in this format so that members outside London can access them easily.



Lucy Maddox takes advantage of the online format of the 2020 UK Conference of Science Journalists to explain the stress bucket approach to mental wellbeing.

May 17th, 2021

The ABSW begins mentoring in constructive journalism, or COJO, for 43 UK journalists in an innovative project to help the country overcome the coronavirus.

Called 'COJO Against Covid', the 18-month, £280,000, project is led by Bournemouth University, and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Known mainly by its key variant, solutions journalism, COJO breaks from traditional journalism's focus on social problems in favour of a balance between problems and solutions to problems.

Other key partners include local and regional news publisher Newsquest and the Solutions Journalism Network. *British Medical Journal* journalist Elisabeth Mahase wins a 30 To Watch Young Journalist Award 2022 for articles she has written as part of the project.

February 22nd, 2022

At the ABSW's "State of Science Writing" event ABSW chair Andy Extance and Rebecca Landon, data analyst and MSc Science Communication student publish their analysis of mainstream science writing in 2021. They cover over 32,000 science, technology and health articles in *BBC News*, *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, *The i*, *The Independent*, *The Mirror*, *The Sun*, and *The Times*, written by more than 3,500 writers.



In 2021, there was a vast number of mainstream UK science, technology and health stories and writers.

March 3rd, 2022, and beyond

The ABSW celebrates its 75th anniversary with a suite of activities including a prize for young science writers, a Dragon's Den-style competition to win funding for innovative projects, a Witness Seminar to record journalists' experiences of the key science events in living memory and a reception for its 650 members.

UKCSJ2020: Unprecedented Challenges

During the Covid-19 pandemic, accurate science reporting became increasingly important. But the pandemic also proved difficult for the ABSW's conferences, as all physical meetings were cancelled for 2020.

Embracing the available technology, ABSW went ahead with the UKCSJ2020 in a virtual format, offering an extended three-day programme exploring topics such as disinformation, mental wellbeing and cybersecurity. This format allowed the event to have a global reach, attracting a diverse range of delegates and panellists, including speakers from the USA, such as Siri Carpenter, co-founder of *The Open Notebook*, and Kyle Pope, editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review*. Despite the challenges more than 200 participants, from Nigeria to Belgium, gathered for the online conference.

The novel format also supported exciting new conference sessions, including a live screening of *Picture a Scientist*, from Global Health Film, chronicling sexual discrimination and harassment in the sciences. The screening was followed by a lively panel discussion.

Our next UK conference in September 2022 is a hybrid online/in-person gathering of science journalists from across the country.

Written by Abigail Pinchbeck



The UK Conference of Science Journalists at the Francis Crick Institute, London, 2018

2020 #UKCSJ on Twitter



A daring plan pays off

ABSW's executive secretary Sallie Robins describes her experiences at the heart of the ambitious plan to put science journalism on the map with its first world conference.

I first learned of the ABSW when I became press officer of the then British Association for the Advancement of Science in the '90s. I sat opposite the force of nature that was Barbie Drillsma, who ran the ABSW. My first work was helping Barbie sort out the membership database to ensure members were a) alive and b) paying the right membership fee. Pallab Ghosh then drew me into the ambitious plans for the World Conference of Science Journalists 2009, a meeting of nearly 1000 science journalists from all around the globe attending a week of discussions, debates, and memorable parties.

It was spectacularly hot, and our venue had no air-conditioning. I remember dashing off to Top Shop to buy clothes that meant I could cope with the heat. Those journalists from far hotter climates didn't know what the fuss was all about -- they remained in suits and ties while the UK journalists resorted to shorts and T-shirts..

The WCSJ09 remains one of my proudest moments -- although it took time to sit back and really appreciate what we had all achieved.

Since then, the ABSW has gone from strength to strength, with some notable dark days when the treatment of our then chair, Connie St Louis, due to the media frenzy that surrounded Tim Hunt's words about women scientists, was atrocious. I do wonder if it would have been a very different story now post the #metoo movement.

But you learn from such extremely tough times, and I think the ABSW now has a much stronger sense of what it is and what it stands for. I am enjoying being back to lead on key events in the 75th anniversary year as Executive Secretary after a much needed few years' break.

Written by Sallie Robins



Sallie Robins directs a delegate at the UK Conference of Science Journalists, Francis Crick Institute, London, 2018

ABSW conferences

23rd July 2010

The Royal Society, London

25th June 2012

The Royal Society, London

18th June 2014

The Royal Society, London

23rd July ECSJ/ESOF 2016

Manchester Central,
Manchester

16th October 2018

The Francis Crick Institute,
London

13th to 15th October 2020

Online

27 September 2022

The Francis Crick Institute,
London

Timeline written by
Andy Extance

Taking science writing into the future

It took a *Guardian* correspondent, who would become a legend in our field, to drive the transition from scientific journalist to modern science journalist. The man we now know as Sir John Maddox recognised that science journalists most importantly had to deliver what their editors and publishers wanted. His mastery of compelling and critical science coverage earned him ABSW awards and roles as chair and honorary president of the organisation.

The key question that differentiated scientific journalists and science journalists was: Whom do we serve? The former were clear that they served the scientific community. For the latter the reality was that they serve their publications. Perhaps it is for the best, then, that we come together in the 21st century under the term science writers and aspire to first and foremost serve our readers.

The modern ABSW has changed its core outlook in a way that transcends these labels. The association initially fiercely guarded entry to the member category. Those who were initially turned away include famous science communicators such as the astronomer Patrick Moore, and Arthur C. Clarke, the writer of the film and book *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Today we are more welcoming. We have had a student member category for decades. And among more recent changes, a strategic review in 2018 saw the ABSW adopt a broad view on who can join. "We are a membership association for media professionals who cover science, medicine, environment, mathematics, engineering and technology," is our position today. This outlook combines with what is likely a larger profession today to see the association's membership numbers near 700, the highest verified level on record.

That may be partly driven by the way the Covid-19 virus has dominated the news over the last two years. Authoritative science writing has proven essential to society and helped increase reading and watching figures for trusted outlets through the pandemic. Specialist science writers who combine expertise with critical and compelling writing have proven their value. As coronavirus concern wanes, previous difficult trends in the media have resumed, however. Yet with energy and climate change worries now prominent, our profession is arguably more important than ever.

Andy Extance is ABSW chair and a freelance science writer.



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