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Science Beat

Why Niche Fellowships and Programs Are Increasingly Critical

By *Sunshine Menezes*

In 1997, when Metcalf Institute for Marine & Environmental Reporting was originally founded at the University of Rhode Island, the idea of training journalists to better cover science was a somewhat “niche” type of professional development.

Newsroom employment peaked in the 1990s, but even then, dedicated science and/or environment beat reporters constituted a small percentage of newsroom staff. Metcalf Institute was formed to help those beat reporters cover the science underlying environmental stories with greater clarity and accuracy. We aimed to achieve this goal by giving a cohort of 10 to 14 journalists a weeklong, immersive science fellowship, focusing on ocean and coastal science because of our relationship with the URI Graduate School of Oceanography. That original training program, the Annual Science Immersion Workshop for Journalists, celebrates its 20th year in 2018.

The past 20 years have seen a seismic shift in the journalism profession. According to the annual newsroom census conducted by the American Society of News Editors from 1978 to 2015, newspapers employed a maximum of 56,900 people in 1990, shrinking to 32,900 in 2015. This shift not only affected overall newsroom employment but also gutted the representation of specific beats, especially science and the environment.

Ironically, U.S. news organizations cast off many veteran environmental beat reporters just as their experience was gaining relevance across all news desks. Now, from local planning issues raised by more frequent and intense extreme weather events to regional and national economic impacts of our energy choices, to national security or immigration, there is an environmental angle everywhere you turn.

Unfortunately, precious few journalists are prepared to cover these stories with the critical eye or confidence they might bring to other topics. A 2002 survey of U.S. journalists reported that 3% received undergraduate degrees in science majors. A 2008 study found that 72% of surveyed journalism school administrators deemed statistical training, specifically, to be valuable for their students, but only 36% of their programs required a statistical reasoning course. As newsrooms increasingly rely on general assignment reporters to cover environmental stories, this absence of science and statistical training is a liability, making it far more difficult for reporters and editors to discern fact from spin on science-based stories.

It's obvious why science training has become an increasingly important journalism credential, but it's challenging for many



SUNSHINE MENEZES (RIGHT) INTERVIEWS NEW YORK TIMES SCIENCE JOURNALIST CORNELIA DEAN.

PHOTO: MARY MURPHY FOR THE PROVIDENCE ATHENAEUM

journalists to take a full week away from their work. Metcalf Institute has adapted to this reality in several strategic ways. We offer one- and two-day science seminars at venues around the country. These intensive training programs focus on a specific environmental issue, such as regional climate change impacts or research related to environmental crises like the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The seminars consistently attract more applicants than we can accommodate.

We offer training programs in partnership with journalism and science conferences, an approach that's cost-effective and offers a powerful incentive for both conference organizers and program participants. And we cast a much wider net with recruitment, reaching out to journalists from across the U.S. and abroad, from small and large newsrooms, and from all media types. These efforts enrich our programs, convening a wide range of perspectives and experiences and inspiring participants to produce more substantive environmental coverage, whether they are general assignment reporters in local outlets or editors overseeing environmental reporting for international audiences.

Over our 20 years, we've learned a few things about conducting this type of training. Most importantly, it works.

A recent study analyzing the reporting of Annual Science Immersion Workshop alumni found that, post-training, their stories provided greater context on environmental topics and addressed the

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thorny issues of scientific uncertainty more often. We've seen that the off-deadline, interactive experiences in these training programs are essential.

Environmental stories are complex and require the ability to wade through both scientific information and an endless supply of opinions and agendas. Journalists are adept at learning on the fly, but given the time to dive more deeply into these topics, they can bring home new strategies for their reporting that serve their audiences.

Finally, we've learned that the professional networking among journalists within a training program is invaluable. The participants share resources, perspectives and war stories. Often, they share professional opportunities, assured that their new contacts take environmental coverage seriously enough to pursue training.

We are in a moment in our nation's history when journalists are frequently vilified as biased, inaccurate or even incompetent. Certainly, the blurred definitions of journalism have made the profession an easier target in the past decade. Yet, at every conference and training program, in professional groups and social media, I encounter journalists who seek to improve their craft and tackle some of the most challenging stories of our time. In the absence of professional development in newsrooms, it is essential that trainers step up to fill the void. Journalists need it, and millions of news consumers demand it. ■

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director of the ICFJ Knight Fellowships. "Our goal through our fellows is to change how journalism is done around the world, to improve and deepen reporting and engage citizens in new ways and, ultimately, to have an impact on society."

While ICFJ Knight Fellowships are a grantee of the Knight Foundation, the program also receives funding from the Gates Foundation for health- and development-focused reporting in Africa and India, and Google News Labs, which supports six-month fellowships, in addition to other organizations.

"This is not a training program, although training is an important means to an end," Colmery said. "What we're aiming to do is to change how people work and to show some kind of tangible results and leave something behind so that our partners and the people we work with can generate their own ideas and continue the work that we've helped to start."

Because this is a long-range goal, the ICFJ Knight Fellowships start at one year and can go longer.

The fellowship is open to journalists as well as managers, digital strategists and technologists with a strong journalism background and accepts proposals as well as applications to existing programs throughout the year. The fellows receive an honorarium that serves as an income, travel expenses and some professional expenses, plus relocation costs if the person is moved to a different country.

In addition to its programs in other countries, ICFJ is also working with U.S. newsrooms, bringing fellows from other countries to collaborate on projects and offer new ideas that have been successful elsewhere.

Academic Fellowships

For those who want to expand their knowledge and their ability to contribute to journalism, academic fellowships have much to offer. Ann Marie Lipinski, curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University and a former Nieman fellow, said her fellowship experience was life-changing. "It had a dramatic

impact on me," she said. "It opened my mind to lots of possibilities for journalism and for journalists. It instilled in me a responsibility for the craft and for my place in the industry that I'm not sure I fully appreciated before."

The Nieman Fellowship, which was started 80 years ago, is set up to strengthen participants' professional skills and leadership abilities in an effort to further the news industry. The program accepts as many as two dozen journalists — 12 from the U.S. and 12 from abroad — each academic year.

Fellows move to Cambridge, Massachusetts, for the school year to do research and take classes at Harvard, MIT and other colleges in the Boston area. They also take part in a series of training and learning opportunities through the fellowship program.

In addition, the foundation now offers the Knight Visiting Nieman Fellowships, a 12-week program funded in part by the Knight Foundation, that brings individuals to campus to work on a targeted issue. And just introduced is the Abrams Nieman Fellowship for Local Investigative Journalism. With funding from the Abrams Foundation in Boston, three journalists from underserved markets in the U.S. come for the classic academic year but then follow that with support for up to nine months of field work on a project of importance to their local communities.

Overall, the Nieman Fellowship looks for people who are interested in leading and becoming significant contributors to journalism. "These are the opportunity for journalists along various points of their career to come for an academic year of study at Harvard," Lipinski said. "We're looking for people who will make the most of this time at a major research institution and who we think will be propelled out of here fortified to do even greater work."

The basic Nieman Fellowship awards a \$70,000 stipend as well as some financial support for housing, childcare and insurance. Applications for those fellowships are due Jan. 31, with Abrams Nieman applications due Feb. 15. ■