



REVIEW

Science journalism and social justice: reflections from WCSJ 2025

Reviewed Conference

13th World Conference of Science Journalists
Pretoria, South Africa, 1–5 December 2025

Reviewed by

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Abstract

The first World Conference of Science Journalists held in Africa was characterised by a conceptual focus on framing science journalism as a social justice practice. This reflection examines how the event interrogated the profession's role within a fractured global order. By foregrounding equity and accountability, WCSJ 2025 served as a renewal moment for the global community, challenging the field to move beyond scientific translation toward critical engagement in an era of systemic crisis.

Keywords

Social inclusion; Science and media; Science communication and social justice

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The 13th World Conference of Science Journalists (WCSJ), held in Pretoria in December 2025 (<https://www.wcsj2025.org/>), marked an important moment for the global science journalism community. It was the first time in the event's 33-year history that the conference took place in Africa, and it convened under a theme that proved anything but rhetorical: *Science journalism and social justice – journalism that builds understanding and resilience*.

This edition of the biennial flagship event of the World Federation of Science Journalists (WFSJ) was organised by the South African Science Journalists' Association (SASJA) and the Science Diplomacy Capital for Africa initiative of South Africa's Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI), in collaboration with the country's Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). The five-day conference unfolded back-to-back with Science Forum South Africa at the CSIR International Convention Centre, with the DSTI supporting both events.

This sequencing was not incidental. It situated science journalism within contemporary geopolitical currents. The meetings took place at the end of South Africa's presidency of the G20 – or, following the withdrawal of the United States, the 'G19' – lending additional resonance to discussions about journalism in a fractured global order.

1 ▪ Long road to Africa

The path to Pretoria was neither straightforward nor guaranteed. WCSJ 2011 was originally scheduled for Cairo, but was relocated to Doha, Qatar, because the unfolding revolution in Egypt made it impossible to host the event safely.

South Africa later bid to host the 2015 conference, but lost out against South Korea, before succeeding a decade later with its bid for 2025.

Against this backdrop, and amid lingering scepticism in some quarters about whether a first African edition would succeed, the local organisers delivered a conference that attendees described on social media as “exceptionally strong” and “world-class”.

2 ▪ Place, power and access

While some previous WCSJ meetings have been held in the Global South – most recently in Medellín, Colombia, in 2023 – the Pretoria gathering was distinctive in that the hosting region shaped the substance, not merely the setting, of the conference. Sessions repeatedly returned to questions of power, access and inequality.

At the same time, the meeting was emphatically global, bringing together more than 400 participants from 73 countries across six continents. This diversity was not accidental. A substantial travel-grant programme – coordinated by the local organising committee and funded by publishing houses, government programmes in South Africa and the United Kingdom, science journalism bodies and research groups – enabled more than 50 journalists who might otherwise have been excluded to attend.

One noticeable absence was mainstream, high-volume general news media, such as major international broadcasters and newspapers. This likely reflects science journalism's position

as a specialised field. Within that niche, however, representation was broad — spanning freelancers, small outlets and major specialist publications.

Beyond representation, the in-person format itself mattered. In an era of remote work and online meetings, many participants emphasised the value of physical gathering — not only for professional exchange, but for fostering a sense of belonging, community and shared purpose. For many freelancers in particular, WCSJ 2025 functioned as a professional clan gathering, countering the sense of isolation they often feel.

3 - Organising principle

Rather than being confined to a single track, social justice was the unifying theme across the programme, encompassing around 60 sessions, 200 speakers and more than 20 field trips to South African research sites.

It shaped discussions on artificial intelligence, climate change, health reporting, research collaboration and professional ethics. The implication was clear: science journalism does not operate outside politics or power, particularly at a time when science itself is increasingly contested.

This framing was set by the three keynote addresses. Environmental lawyer Cormac Cullinan challenged inherited notions of objectivity and justice, urging journalists to reflect on whose interests dominant narratives serve in an era of ecological crisis. Marine biologist David Obura made a data-driven appeal for journalism that conveys uncertainty, limits, and trade-offs without oversimplification. Infectious-disease specialist Linda-Gail Bekker drew on the history of HIV/Aids to highlight a need for journalism that interrogates.

4 - Professional introspection

One of the most striking features of WCSJ 2025 was the extent to which science journalists turned the gaze inward. Sessions on journalism under fire, and conflict of interest foregrounded experiences from conflict zones and authoritarian contexts. These discussions resisted simplistic binaries between journalism and activism. Instead, they asked whether journalism can meaningfully avoid politics when science itself is weaponised, censored or ignored.

At the same time, participants emphasised journalism's capacity to make a tangible public-interest impact. Investigative reporting on environmental degradation, health failures and extractive industries matters not only because it informs, they argued, but because it can shift outcomes.

Risk, however, was not romanticised. Journalists spoke candidly about surveillance, detention and insecurity. Safety emerged not as a moral test, but as a structural constraint shaping who gets to report and whose stories are told.

5 - Trust and tools

Concerns about trust surfaced repeatedly. Speakers warned against the uncritical adoption of large language models (LLMs) in newsrooms, stressing that AI systems reproduce the

incentives and biases of their creators and training data. The danger, they argued, is not merely technical error, but the erosion of journalism's core asset: credibility.

Far from being praise-singers or science groupies, journalists were urged to see scepticism as an appreciation of science itself. As SASJA president Mandi Smallhorne noted in her opening address, it is precisely because journalists care about science that they dig deep to expose misconduct, fraud and misleading communication.

The conference was also notably practical. Workshops and sessions on journalistic tools, data analysis, investigative methods, opinion writing and moderating public discussions reflected a commitment to professional development. The organisers further extended the conference's educational life by making recordings of many sessions available online for a year after the event.

6 - Who speaks for science?

Questions of representation were taken up in a session on women and science journalism. Speakers argued that under-visibility is not a matter of confidence or competence, but a structural issue shaped by newsroom routines, academic cultures and social norms. Women scientists, they noted, are too often visible only at designated moments rather than treated as authoritative sources.

Discussions on the relationship between science journalists and science communicators added further nuance. While recognising the value of outreach and communication, discussions in several sessions stressed the importance of maintaining critical distance. The tension between collaboration and critique was not resolved — nor should it be — but treated as a productive friction at the heart of the profession.

7 - Critical notes

As successful as WCSJ 2025 was, it was not without shortcomings, which fall broadly into questions of form and substance.

On form: some logistical and scheduling challenges were evident, and standards of session chairing and presentation varied, as is common at large conferences.

The tone of many sessions struck a balance that felt neither performative nor overly academic. Conversations were often grounded in shared newsroom experience rather than presentational polish, more akin to extended editorial or podcast discussions than TED-style talks — something that many participants found refreshing.

Language posed a familiar challenge. English functioned as the medium of communication, but there may have been scope for sessions in other widely spoken languages such as French or Spanish. Regional meetings on the sidelines partly addressed this, though they tended to focus on association business rather than professional matters.

On substance: the social justice theme itself could be read as ideological by those more comfortable with narrower conceptions of science and journalism. From that perspective, sessions on vulnerable communities, responsible reporting, traditional medicine, and on the role of politics in promoting science denialism may appear 'woke' or 'left'.

Rather than deny that the programme had a distinct orientation, the more useful question is what that enabled. WCSJ 2025 treated science journalism as a civic practice shaped by material, political and socioeconomic conditions. In a world marked by climate disruption, widening inequality, public-health precarity and increasing mis- and disinformation, there can be no meaningful science journalism without engaging the conditions under which science and journalism is produced, contested and applied.

Any residual notion that 'hard science' sits apart from social justice was challenged by sessions on quantum theory, climate and health, and brain and behaviour science. Reporting on antimicrobial resistance, for example, was framed explicitly as public-interest journalism, highlighting the global health risks of inaction, weak regulation and unequal access to care.

8 - Turning point

WCSJ 2025 marked a renewal moment for science journalism as an organised profession.

The World Federation of Science Journalists (WFSJ), which represents around 10,000 science journalists globally through its member associations, has acknowledged a period of turbulence in recent years, including a widening gap between leadership and membership during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. No annual general meeting was convened during WCSJ 2023 in Medellín, leaving the Federation's formal governance processes stalled and outstanding business carried over.

In Pretoria, however, its AGM — attended by 34 associations — unfolded without incident. Ben Deighton secured a second term as WFSJ president, following his appointment in 2024. Regional groupings also convened on the sidelines of WCSJ 2025, while the WFSJ booth emerged as a focal point for networking and capacity-building.

9 - Looking ahead

The closing session focused on the future, with the formal handover to London as host of WCSJ 2027, followed by the announcement that — after a close contest with Australia — China would host the conference in 2029. The WFSJ board took more than 20 hours to reach the decision.

The question for both future hosts is this: will their editions show the same willingness to speak truth to power? One hopes that the boldness exhibited in Pretoria will travel.

10 - Conclusion

WCSJ 2025 demonstrated that science journalism is not insulated from the forces shaping the contemporary world. It is entangled with them — epistemically, politically and ethically.

For science communication scholarship, the Pretoria conference offers a rich case study of a profession grappling with the limits of its freedoms and responsibilities in a fractured global landscape.

About the author

Desmond Thompson is a South African freelance journalist who reports on higher education and science across the continent. He contributes regularly to *University World News* and *Nature Africa*, and has previously worked for various Media24 titles and in corporate communication roles at Stellenbosch University. He holds a BA in Political Science and an Honours degree in Philosophy from what is now the University of Johannesburg. He is a member of the South African Science Journalists' Association, which is affiliated with the World Federation of Science Journalists. At WCSJ 2025, he hosted a panel discussion on science journalism and equitable research collaboration.

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