

## WCSJ2019: scaling new heights in Switzerland

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**Reviewed Conference**

11<sup>th</sup> WORLD CONFERENCE OF SCIENCE JOURNALISTS,  
LAUSANNE, SWITZERLAND, 1–5 JULY 2019

**Reviewed by**

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**Abstract**

At a time when science is perceived to be under attack and our planet is facing severe challenges, the role of science journalism in taking on these challenges was a key theme of the 11<sup>th</sup> World Conference of Science Journalists. But, while policymakers and science leaders are urging journalists to help restore public trust in science, science journalists are concerned about the future viability of their profession in the face of faltering business models in mainstream media.

**Keywords**

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At the tail end of a heat wave that seared across large parts of Europe, the 11<sup>th</sup> World Conference of Science Journalists (<https://www.wcsj2019.eu/>) took place in Lausanne, Switzerland, from 1–5 July 2019. Not surprisingly, climate change was a hot topic on the conference agenda and highlighted as the story that would shape our future world.

Hosted at the impressive Swiss Tech Convention Centre, the WCSJ 2019 generally ran like the proverbial (Swiss) clockwork. Metaphorically and at times even literally, the event lived up to its promise of reaching new heights for the profession.

With close to 1 250 participants (60% of them female), delegate numbers were slightly down compared to the 2017 conference in San Francisco. “Science journalism is in a precarious position at present and therefore it was more important to us to present a relevant conference that addressed the real issues facing our profession, than to simply keep on growing in size,” said Mohammed Yahia, President of the World Federation of Science Journalists (WFSJ) at the time of the conference in Lausanne.

The bulging conference programme consisted of 63 sessions, supplemented by practical workshops, press conferences and a wide choice of sponsored lunch events. There were many award-winning science writers, leading editors and top scientists in the line-up of 337 speakers. In the buzzing exhibition area, delegates could engage with bio-robotics, virtual reality, science movies and interactive games. Those who had any energy left at night, could choose from several science-themed social events. Amongst the 35 field trips on offer, the opportunity to visit the high-altitude research station at the top of the Jungfrau was one of the most popular. All of this was made possible by the joint efforts of an 'Alpine Consortium' consisting of three national science journalism associations — Italy, France and Switzerland — as well as sponsorships from corporates and foundations.

Diversity and inclusivity were always going to be a challenge at a conference hosted in Switzerland. Despite 83 countries being represented and 109 travel scholarships awarded to journalists who, according to the organisers, were mainly from developing countries, the under-representation of science journalists from Africa, Latin America and Asia was very noticeable. "I would have liked to see more people from Africa and this is something we must think about going forward," Yahia said. "It is inevitable that this meeting must come to Africa within the next decade and making that happen will require support from the WFSJ for the much smaller and younger science journalism associations in Africa."

Equally noticeable was the effort made to include issues and voices from the developing world on key panels and to present workshops focused on the needs and challenges of journalists from the Global South. In a keynote on *The African heart of science*, Uzodinma Iweala, CEO of *Ventures Africa Magazine* and CEO of the Africa Center in New York, raised questions about ingrained racial prejudices in western science and the need for more diversity in newsrooms.

In the introductory plenary sessions of the conference, several policy makers echoed the urgency of robust, diversified and high-quality science journalism. "Science has never needed to be shared as much as today," Frédérique Vidal, French Minister of Research, said. "At a time when people are bombarded with masses of science information, journalists are crucial to select, sort, prioritise and provide context," Vice President of the Swiss Federal Council Simonetta Sommaruga added. Francesca Unsworth, BBC Director of News and Current Affairs, agreed that science journalists had to help people deal with the complexities and uncertainties of science.

Speaking on behalf of one of the main corporate sponsors of the event, Seema Kumar, Vice President for Innovation, Global Health and Science Policy Communication at Johnson & Johnson, pledged that the company would donate an additional \$5 to the World Federation of Science Journalists (up to an amount of \$15 000) for every tweet posted up to 31 July 2019 featuring the hashtag #championsofscience. Kumar spoke about "falling in love with science" and promoting the "power and potential" of science as part of this social media campaign. This prompted a response from one of the veterans amongst science writers, Deborah Blum, who is a Pulitzer-prize winner and current publisher of *Undark*. "Science journalism is not promotion of science, nor is it about making us feel good about science," Blum said. "Instead, it is about illuminating science

independently.” Flavia Schlegel, Special Envoy for Science in Global Policy of the International Science Council, reiterated the view that science journalists had to remain critical and investigative, since “not everything is positive that comes out of science”.

Following on from this, the debate about science journalists as science watchdogs, as opposed to cheerleaders for science, emerged as a pertinent thread throughout the conference, as well as on social media platforms. Delegates flocked to sessions on the role of investigative journalism to uncover scientific misconduct, limit corporate manipulation of science news and derail orchestrated disinformation campaigns. While no one would deny the importance of exposing those who falsify scientific data for their own gain, Mary Woolley, president of Research!America, reminded delegates that, just like journalists, most scientists were in their profession to serve the public.

Interestingly, several leading media editors were of the opinion that journalists could and should play a role in restoring public trust in science. For example, Jérôme Fenoglio, Editorial Director of *Le Monde*, spoke passionately about the need for science journalists to go beyond reporting on discoveries, and to play a role in defending and protecting the integrity and process of science. Nathalie Wappler, Director of the Swiss public broadcaster and Monika Bauerlein, CEO of *Mother Jones*, urged journalists to explain the process of science in order to win back public support. Several discussions focused on the importance of reporting on science as a process, instead of focussing on the results of single studies. A session on ‘solutions journalism’ focused on ways that journalists could tell more positive stories about science, but panel members emphasised that it was not about promoting science, but rather writing about proven, science-based solutions.

Fiona Fox, Director of the UK Science Media Centre, led a special session on the changing roles of science press officers. Speakers underlined the importance of responsible and ethical communication of science, but also pointed out the synergies between journalists and institutional communicators. “We’re all in this together, and we all need to do better,” was the frank message from Canadian radio journalist Ira Basen. He illustrated the pervasiveness of spin (or hype) across every step along the route from science to news and concluded that researchers, public information officers and journalists may all be guilty at times of using questionable strategies to inflate findings and get more traction from a story. Journalists, in particular, are often overly optimistic when they write about findings, leading to unrealistic public expectations, he added.

Recognising that both journalists and communicators depend on scientists in order to communicate science, some discussion focused on scientists and the barriers that prevent scientists from engaging with the media. Journalists see the hesitance of (some) scientists to engage with the media as a key stumbling block and talked about ways to lure scientists out of their ivory towers and make media engagement a valued part of scientific research. The need for credible scientists to engage with the media was also highlighted in a hard-hitting plenary presented by science historian and author of *Mechants of Doubt*, Naomi Oreskes. She provided eye-opening insights into how so-called ‘think tanks’ fabricate controversies and trap journalists into the idea of presenting two sides to a science story, thereby undermining the authority of evidence-based consensus in science.

Taking place in the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary month of the Apollo 11 Moon landing, the conference featured a forward-looking plenary on “The Moon and beyond: Where will we be in 50 years in space exploration?” Panel members agreed that future space missions would not be about flags and footsteps, but rather about doing high-class space science and living sustainably in space. Later in the week, a compelling and impassioned presentation about the urgent battle to conserve biodiversity came from former IPBES Chair Robert Watson. “Scientists are producing the data, but science journalists play a crucial role in keeping pressure on the public and policymakers”, he said.

A lively Twitter feed featuring the #WCSJ2019 made it possible for journalists from around the world to join the conversations about the nature and independence of science journalism, and concerns about its future. Cartoonist Reto Schneider (@retouschneider) commemorated the conference with a cartoon illustrating a group of insects talking about a group of science journalists. “Science journalists? What do they want here?” the one asks. “They are like us: indispensable, but their habitats are shrinking,” comes the reply.

In his farewell message Olivier Dessibourg, President of the Organizing Committee, acknowledged that it was a huge challenge to realise such a demanding event, requiring a large team effort and considerable resources. Despite the huge task awaiting them, delegates from the Colombian Association of Science Journalism erupted with joy when it was announced that their bid to host the conference in 2021 was selected over a competing bid from Canada. With Medellín as the host city, the next global gathering of science journalists is set to be colourful, diverse and globally relevant.

## Author

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