



EDITOR'S JOURNAL

KEVIN FINNERAN

New Voices, New Approaches

About six months ago in Tempe, Arizona, about two dozen young scientists, policy wonks, and communicators gathered for a “pitch slam.” In a hotel meeting room near the Arizona State University campus, teams that each included a writer (or blogger or radio producer) and an academic expert lined up to give brief descriptions of articles they planned to write. The judges at the front of the room included a literary agent, a Simon and Schuster editor, the editor of *Nature*, a *Smithsonian* editor, and me. Doing our best *American Idol* imitations, we reacted to each of the pitches. Later in the day we met individually with each of the pitch teams to discuss how to best translate their ideas into effective articles.

The slam was part of an innovative program designed by Lee Gutkind, a writer in residence at ASU’s Consortium for Science, Policy, and Outcomes and the editor of *Creative Nonfiction* magazine. With financial support from the National Science Foundation, Gutkind and CSPO co-director David Guston assembled an outstanding group of early-career academics and professional communicators (writers, bloggers, radio producers, filmmakers, museum curators) to conduct an experiment in introducing the next generation of policy experts to a new way of explaining policy. The goal is to develop a way to make science policy more accessible and engaging to a large audience. The method is to incorporate the policy analysis in a narrative structure because, though this is hard to believe, some people would rather read a compelling story than a meticulously organized piece of rigorous academic argument.

The Arizona workshop, “To Think, To Write, To Publish: Forging a Working Bond Between Next Generation Science Communicators and the Next Generation of Science and Technology Policy Leaders,” enabled the young communicators and experts to spend a weekend sharing ideas and experiences, testing their proposals with their peers, and working collectively to advance a new approach to stimulating interest in science and technology policy. After the workshop they all stayed in Tempe to participate in *The Rightful Place of Science* conference at which experts from around the world participated in a wide-ranging discussion of the full spectrum of policy concerns, no doubt planting the seeds for future articles.

Issues is dedicated to broadening participation in policy discussions and has tried to make its articles more appealing by eliminating the footnotes, jargon, and excessive formality that characterizes scholarly writing. We believe that we have had some success, but we have also noted that most Americans are still more likely to pick up the *New Yorker*. So we will be attempting to go even further by allowing authors to use stories and flesh and blood characters that will highlight the human dimensions of policy debates.

A few gifted writers have already demonstrated that narrative can enrich a story about a scientific or technical subject so that it becomes more understandable and more palatable to a large audience. Books such as John McPhee’s *Curve of Binding Energy*, Tracy Kidder’s *Soul of a New Machine*, and Lewis Thomas’s *Lives of a Cell* are serious and important books that have reached a wide audience. A new genera-

tion of writers such as Malcolm Gladwell, Atul Gawande, Michael Spector, and Jonah Lehrer regularly produce entertaining and influential articles on scientific and technological issues for the *New Yorker*. We science policy wonks are forever bemoaning the dearth of broad public discussion of the meaning, value, and use of science and technology. One way to stimulate that discussion is for more people to write creatively and engagingly about these concerns.

An object lesson. In Spring 2008, we published “Learning to Deliver Better Health Care” by Elliott S. Fisher of Dartmouth Medical School. The piece provided eye-opening evidence of the disparity in health care costs across the country where there was no evidence that higher cost was linked to higher quality. The article included detailed cost information about UCLA, Johns Hopkins, the Cleveland Clinic, and the Mayo Clinic. The analysis was clear, the evidence solid, and the response several orders of magnitude short of overwhelming. In June 2009 the *New Yorker* published “The Cost Conundrum” by Atul Gawande, an outstanding writer who also happens to be an associate professor of surgery at Harvard Medical School. Gawande tells the fascinating story of how the relatively poor town of McAllen, Texas, became the most expensive place in the country to obtain health care. He cites the work that Fisher and his Dartmouth colleagues have done, but he integrates with interviews and observations from his visit to McAllen.

According to a report in *Kaiser Health News* a few weeks after the article appeared, the response was a tad more im-

pressive: “The resulting article is now being called one of the most influential health care stories in recent memory. The *New York Times* reported that President Obama made it required reading for his staff and cited it at a meeting with Democratic senators last week. His budget chief, Peter Orszag, has written two blog posts about the article. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius referred to it in a speech at the John F. Kennedy School of Government last week. Lawmakers on the Hill also are discussing it. Congressman Jim Cooper (D-TN), for instance, says the article has ‘shifted perceptions on the health care industry.’”

Even Gawande and the *New Yorker* do not regularly make that big a splash, and it didn’t hurt that the health care reform debate was raging at the time, but there is no doubt that good stories attract readers. So over the next few editions Issues will give narrative, and a few representatives of the next generation of science and technology policy experts and communicators, a chance. We will be publishing articles written by some of the teams that participated in the pitch slam. Appropriately, the first installment, by Meera Lee Sethi and Adam Briggie, explores the importance of how one frames the story of synthetic biology in the policy debate. You will see that the analysis is as perceptive as the story is engaging. We’ve been reading early drafts of some of the articles that follow, and we are confident that they will maintain this high standard of insight and readability. Issues is very pleased and proud to be able to introduce you to a host of new policy experts and lively voices.