

CHANGING TOOLS, TIMELESS VALUES

In a time of dramatic evolution, amazing discovery and occasional controversy, science journalists are the vital conduit between researchers, policymakers and the public.

 by Pallava Bagla



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Science and science journalism are two sides of the same coin. Unless there is good science being done, science journalists would have little news to report about.

From the cradle to the grave, increasingly the advances of science and technology today drive the world. As we progress into the 21st century, the complexities are increasing. Scientific disciplines are highly specialized and the pace of development so fast that most scientists literally spend a lifetime immersed in unravelling the mysteries of their respective domains. Communicating results usually means writing complex scientific papers in a language understood only by the peer group. Consequently, the common person is seldom exposed to the excitement and joy of doing science. Indeed a pity.

It is here that science journalists with their curiosity and flair to take the message to the wider audience come face-to-face with the scientific community. Science journalists deconstruct complexities of research to tell a story that is understood by the layperson. A happy co-existence is the norm of the game. Though there is occasional sparring, as when

we dig deep to expose sporadic instances of misconduct in the scientific community.

The tools used for communicating have changed dramatically, from a time when the printed word was king to today, when the Internet and the social media play a central role. Yet the fundamentals of science journalism – the who, what, when, where and why – have not changed in the last 30 years, nor are they likely to change in times to come.



Photo courtesy: Roberto Ferrari

Certainly a lot has changed in the world since the first meeting of TWAS in 1985. To give one example, the last 30 years have seen a sea change even in the world's largest democracy, India, thanks to effective deployment of science. Back then, when the Green Revolution was still unfolding, I used to line up for scarce food stocks in ration shops; today, my children queue up in food courts. Recently the "voice of the South" loudly reverberated when India made global history in reaching Mars in its very first attempt, opening a new era of low-cost inter-planetary exploration.

Change is omnipresent. Tomorrow's news may be highly personalized, tailor-made for each individual. In the not-so-distant future, the smart phones that journalists carry could become the equivalent of mobile television stations. Multimedia is the way forward and scientists who grasp and clinch this changing aspect of the communications technology are the ones who will be able to do better outreach.

There is no doubt that science has a bright future, and therefore, contrary to the gloomy scenario one sometimes hears, science journalism too has sunny prospects. Just embrace the change. ■