Photo courtesy of Charles Petit

# Science writing: the changing landscape

About 40 years ago I was a University of California, Berkeley astronomy student with a summer job at the Mt. Wilson Observatory. I listened from a neighboring room as a solar specialist read, in the *Pasadena Star News*, an account of his own research. He moaned. He cursed. He exclaimed in frustration: "What this world needs is some good science writers!"

Angels sang. The clouds parted. Could I make a living reporting and writing the kinds of stories that nailed my eyeballs to the page—stories about the farthest galaxy, "living fossils," an even bigger rocket from Wernher von Braun? Sign me up!

Journalism has been my working life ever since, almost all on the science beat—first at a small newspaper in Livermore, then 26 years at the *San Francisco Chronicle* and another six at *US News & World Report*. It has been a good time.

Lately, though, times are not so good for many people like me.

Full-time science reporters covering breaking news in the traditional media are growing scarcer. Not only has the absolute number of newspaper science writers in the United States fallen, from about 90 twenty years ago to 80 or so now, as judged by the membership rolls of the National Association of Science Writers, but the percentage of members in that category has fallen by more than half to about 3 percent today. The rest are an increasing number of freelancers, public affairs officers for research institutions, book writers, and the like.

While there are still plenty of jobs in science writing, the loss of newspaper staff positions is critical because they are a key source of original reporting, the backbone on which many other layers of science journalism—magazines, radio, television—are built.

Science sections in newspapers are becoming rare. In 1989, there were at least 95 newspaper science sections; today there are about 30, and a rising share of them focus on health and medicine. The loss of this space makes it harder for staff writers to cover science topics in depth.

It's not that editors don't want science news. But in an era of steeply declining circulation and loss of traditional advertising, something has to go.

The Internet is a big factor in the decline. Want to see what the *Boston Globe* or *New York Times* has in its science section? It's free, a few clicks away—along with the rest of the paper's contents. Most traditional news outlets feel compelled to give their product away on the Web. That is not a winning business model.

As newspapers sag, surveys show that the public gets 40 percent of its science information from TV, 20 percent from the Internet, and just 14 percent from newspapers.

The changing state of the media ambushed me in late 2004. I took a more-or-less compulsory buyout from *US News*, which was scrapping everything in its science unit except for health and medicine coverage, and turned to freelancing.

At February's American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in San Francisco I noticed a number of former newspaper writers—veterans not ready for retirement—without much to do. I heard from colleagues who were taking buyouts or simply quitting. Since then I have received a continuous stream of tips on who most recently left the daily news biz for university public relations, freelancing, book writing, or fishing.

So far, the fabric of newspaper science reporting is frayed, not shredded. The Associated Press has several full-time science writers in the United States and a few overseas, and big outfits with large corporate owners, such as the *New York Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle*, syndicate their articles widely. But fewer local papers have science writers on staff. We're all waiting for big media to find an online business model with fat enough profits to pay real reporters to dig out science news.

For me, science is an essential source of the purest sort of news. It is not just new names and places tacked onto familiar plots of crime, corruption, and catastrophe. It produces things new to human experience. Science stories bring to the public a world of rather smart people who usually have done something right and well. Given the usual run of news, that's a tonic. It would be a shame if these stories became even more rare.

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