

Scientific Expertise and Context on Deadline, Rick Weiss, Director, AAAS SciLine

Rick Weiss provided a general description of SciLine and discussed the ways the service could facilitate connection between PIOs and journalists.

He started by providing two examples as case studies: the 2004 debates on stem cell research and the DARPA headlines regarding robotics using chips in brains. With the stem cell research, the NIH and other reporters kept communicating promises that weren't possible. When asked why they kept telling the public these things, Ronald McKay (who was then a senior scientist at NIH) noted, "People need a fairy tale. Maybe that's unfair, but they need a story line that's relatively simple to understand." The DARPA headlines faced a different issue entirely. What the agency was doing differed greatly from what the media was talking about. Weiss said the first case symbolized the inevitability that reporters are going to take advantage of headline-grabbing opportunities when scientists or agencies are not completely honest about what they are doing. But the second case showed that when it's the reporter that overstates things, scientists and agencies can take the opportunity to be open about what the truth is rather than staying silent and just stewing about those bad reporters.

He then summarized the federal scientific integrity guidelines that were originally developed at OSTP for use in federal agencies. Researchers at the national labs and DOE sites are free to discuss research publicly and make public comments within their areas of expertise. However, researchers should not represent their lab or site on matters of policy, budget, management, or national security unless they are coordinating with DOE.

Weiss pointed out that it's an advantage for agencies to be out there in the public eye when possible. The researchers that DOE supports are in the highest and most progressive fields of science and need to be seen by the public as playing those roles. Raising that awareness is accomplished in part by putting out press releases and responding to reporters. However, these methods miss other opportunities because reporters don't know what they're missing.

The goal of SciLine is to get research-based facts into news stories. SciLine does this through a variety of platforms. An **expert matching service** connects reporters to scientists. Reporters contact SciLine with details about the story and the service tries to match a scientist that fits their needs on deadline. **Fact sheets** provide topical content written in-house, which SciLine sends out to experts to make sure everything is correct. **Media briefings** are roughly one-hour-long-events with three experts who each report on a subtopic about the larger topic. Finally, **boot camps** are 2.5 days, all-expenses-paid events, for journalists to learn everything on a topic.

Since it launched in 2017, SciLine has handled at least 700 requests with a 98% success rate on getting a reporter an expert by deadline. 80% of stories quoted that expert and if they did not quote them, the scientist's perspective helped frame the story. Weiss highlighted several examples where SciLine had helped reporters correctly report on stories that other reporters had got wrong. In each case, he detailed how they got in touch with reporters or put experts in touch with science communicators to help better tell science stories.