

IU professor's new textbook uses the best science writing from the New York Times

June 15 2010



C. Holly Stocking, professor emeritus of journalism at Indiana University, is lead author of *The New York Times Reader -- Science and Technology*. Credit: Photo by Carol Polsgrove

For decades, The New York Times has been one of the nation's premier outlets for stories about science. Now, a retired Indiana University journalism professor has put many of those stories together in a unique collection aimed at students of science writing.

Though intended for the classroom, Discover magazine blogger Carl Zimmer, and a contributor to the volume, has written that the collection,

The New York Times Reader -- Science and Technology (Congressional Quarterly Press), is an anthology of science writing "that can stand on its own."

Lead author S. Holly Stocking, a professor emeritus of journalism at IU and a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, said the book also may benefit scientists who find explaining their research to be a challenge.

"There are a lot of scientists out there who really want to see their science get across to the public and don't know how to do it. This collection should get them started," Stocking added.

Produced with the full cooperation of the New York Times, the collection contains nearly 50 science stories from fields covered regularly by the paper -- including biology, physics, medicine, astronomy, psychology, environmental and science.

They include news stories about emerging discoveries and scientific meetings, explanatory features, narrative interviews, Q-and-As, profiles, trend and issue stories, extended narratives, reviews, personal essays, columns and blogposts.

"The idea was to create a reader of the kinds of stories that don't always appear in commercial collections of science and nature writing, but that model common narrative paths taken by science writers in a variety of media," Stocking said.

The Reader assumes that good writers are good readers -- it includes many pointers for reading in ways that can help writers new to science writing learn how to structure their stories. Checklists and annotated stories also offer tips for explaining science and technology clearly and engagingly, without hype or distortion -- as do five [New York Times](#)

writers interviewed for the book -- Natalie Angier, Denise Grady, Amy Harmon, Dennis Overbye and Andrew Revkin.

Stocking regards the collection as a kind of "legacy" project built on more than two decades of teaching science writing at IU and prior work as a journalist at the Los Angeles Times, the Minneapolis Tribune and other media outlets. She hopes the book will help the next generation of science writers -- wherever their work appears, in a newspaper, magazine, blog or elsewhere.

"The need for responsible science writing has never been greater," Stocking said. "Science has important implications for all of us -- for individuals' health and wellbeing, for relationships between groups and nations, for the environment, for our appreciation of our place in the cosmos, and for so many other things.

"But many people in the public tend to see scientific claims as just more political claims. Sometimes they are, but that's all the more reason why those who communicate about science need to do it in such a way that it promotes public understanding," she said.

She adds that both scientists and journalists are needed to sort out the wheat from the chaff for a public that can grow confused by or frustrated with claims that conflict with one another or that clash with their own beliefs and understandings.

That the volume arrives during a time of major upheaval for traditional media -- and a round of losses of science and environmental writers from major media, including The Times -- may strike some as a puzzle. But Stocking sees much of the gloom-and-doom in an historical light.

"There is a lot of hand-wringing in science writing circles right now, it's true. But you heard the same sorts of things from magazine editors when

television came along," Stocking said.

"Magazines survived for a very long time, just in a different form, and unless I'm wildly wrong, science writing too is going to survive, even if it assumes a different guise.

"The United States still spends more money on research and development than any other country in the world, and investments in science are growing by leaps and bounds in other countries, so science writing isn't going to die any time soon."

Whatever the future holds for science writing, science writing educators have heralded the collection as a unique and valuable resource in the field of science communication.

Deborah Blum, a past president of the National Association of Science Writers, a Pulitzer Prize winner and co-editor of *The Field Guide for Science Writers*, has called the book "really the perfect combination: work by some of the best science journalists in the world analyzed by one of the most respected experts in the field of science communication."

Susanna Hornig Priest, editor of the journal *Science Communication*, wrote that "this collection -- created by one of the most thoughtful and insightful journalism academics around -- reminds us of what we stand to lose if we lose track of the importance of connecting science to society."

Provided by Indiana University

Citation: IU professor's new textbook uses the best science writing from the New York Times (2010, June 15) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-06-iu-professor-textbook->

science-york.html

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