REVIEWS

The Reporter’s Handbook on Nuclear Materials, Energy, and Waste Management

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aving talked with dozens of reporters on nuclear-related issues for more than 20 years, I can attest that a good reporter’s handbook could be very useful not only for reporters but also for experts and citizens being interviewed or providing stories. Since there are very few reporters specializing in nuclear issues, much time in many interviews is taken explaining basic information rather than discussing the current event or story. Those explanations can be complicated, so concise summaries of basic issues could help reporters understand the topics and provide the person imparting information with a framework to clearly discuss the issues. A summary of different points and key facts, along with good questions and answers could also be useful. And, a good glossary of terms could provide clear explanations of common and not-so-common terminologies. Unfortunately, despite some useful information, The Reporter’s Handbook on Nuclear Materials, Energy, and Waste Management is a disappointment. It largely fails in two essential areas — not meeting journalistic standards of checking with multiple sources and, in too many instances, not meeting journalistic or academic standards of accuracy. Some of the errors and omissions are surprising in light of the book’s preface, which states that the authors interviewed leading experts from universities, business, government, and citizens groups. Some of the briefs will appear to be slanted in one direction or the other because experts, like everyone else, have viewpoints. Yet, it was critical for us that the book be as balanced as possible. Consequently, every brief in the book has been reviewed by an external panel of individuals who, while they may have differing viewpoints, have expertise on this subject.

Among the listed contributors — “Experts Interviewed or Consulted” — is Dr. Seth Tuler, who was interviewed for the chapter entitled “Risk Communication and Nuclear Materials.” When asked about his involvement, he stated that about a year after the interview and he was sent a draft chapter. He made various comments about the chapter, but received no feedback. When he read the published book, he could see that his comments were largely ignored. Neither he, nor any reader, could tell which parts of the chapter were based on his interview. That practice contrasts markedly with my personal experience, wherein academic sources allow me to review specific quotes or parts of the manuscript to ensure that they correctly incorporated my input. Even when reporters are on tight deadlines and do not have time for such additional checking, they frequently include quotations or other means, so readers can judge the sources. The writers of this handbook did not follow this practice.

The book’s risk communication chapter begins with the important premise that those in charge of nuclear materials needed to provide information to the residents of surrounding communities and all those potentially impacted by risks associated with these activities, and they need to listen to community concerns. But that first paragraph and the entire chapter then specifically focus on Department of Energy (DOE) sites without pointing out that there are more than 70 nuclear power plant sites lacking a system advisory that, instead, contrast to the few DOE sites discussed. The chapter also states: “There are notification requirements about certain activities, such as shipments that might pass through communities by being delivered to neighborhoods, that might impact neighbor-

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