

## FINAL REPORT

### ASHE Committee on Embargoes

Linda Sax, Chair  
Shaun Harper  
David Tandberg

Our committee was asked to consider whether ASHE should adopt an embargo policy for papers and other sessions presented at the annual meeting. In this report we: (1) provide background context for why this issue has arisen; (2) review current ASHE policy and practice regarding media coverage of conference papers; (3) consider the pros and cons of adopting an embargo policy; and (4) recommend whether ASHE ought to adopt an embargo policy for its annual meeting.

#### Background

As stated in the ASHE Bylaws, “The primary mission of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) is to foster scholarly inquiry of the highest standards of excellence for the purpose of increasing knowledge about and the understanding of higher education.” Record-level conference participation in recent years suggests that ASHE may be accomplishing its mission among its membership. However, it is not clear whether ASHE scholars are fully successful in communicating their research findings to the larger public; this is an area where education scholars have often been criticized (Yettick, 2015).

Online and print media play a critical but often underutilized role in translating and publicizing education research findings for a broad audience. Thus, it is important for ASHE scholars and their institutions to develop productive and ongoing relationships with reporters and other media representatives. Dissemination of scholarly research can contribute to public knowledge, public policy, and even generate interest among potential funders. As of yet, however, ASHE has not developed a policy for how best to engage with reporters as it relates to papers delivered at the annual meeting.

Though there are many aspects of “media relations” that may be important to ASHE members, this report focuses primarily on the issue of press embargoes for papers presented at the annual meeting. In the scientific community, embargoes play an important role by prescribing a date (and often a time) at which research findings may be “released” to the public. When this practice is followed, researchers and university press offices may prepare press releases or other briefs that provide select reporters<sup>1</sup> with advance information about an upcoming presentation or release of a report. Reporters typically use the time prior to the lifting of the embargo to

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<sup>1</sup> Typically media relations offices will send the embargoed press release to a select “short list” of media outlets or specific journalists; other reporters or outlets will not see the release until after the embargo is lifted.

interview researchers (and others) in preparation of their story. When adhered to, embargo policies enable multiple media sources to cover a story simultaneously without the risk of being “scooped” by a competitor outlet.

### **Current Policy and Practice within ASHE and Other Relevant Associations**

Presently, ASHE does not have a policy regarding the timing of the formal release of papers or other session content that are presented at the annual meeting. We looked into a few other scholarly associations and found one that has a clear embargo policy (AERA), one with a more vague embargo policy (APSA) and some that do not appear to have an embargo policy (AIR and ASA).

Given the close alignment between ASHE and AERA, the AERA policy may be the most relevant to ASHE. When submitting AERA proposals, the online submission portal states, “Contents of research papers being presented at the (year) AERA Annual Meeting are embargoed until date and time of presentation, unless otherwise specified.” There is also a “media” section of the AERA website where media are alerted of the embargo on all abstracts included in the online program.

### **What are the pros and con of an embargo?**

We reached out to several relevant groups (including faculty, graduate students, university media relations, journal editors, and association executives and past presidents) to gain their perspectives on an embargo policy. Across the board, all were either supportive of the idea, or at least neutral on the topic. None opposed the idea. Nevertheless, these conversations generated important arguments both for and against ASHE adopting an embargo policy. Below is a summary of major points in each category:

PRO (in favor of embargoes):

- An embargo policy would aim to prevent a story from being “scooped” in advance of the conference, and thus may encourage coverage by a greater number of outlets. The present lack of a formal embargo policy may in fact be undermining our efforts to get coverage. For example, if there is no embargo policy, a media outlet may release paper findings in advance of the conference, thus dissuading other outlets from covering the study (i.e., it becomes “old news”).
- An embargo policy would prevent early coverage of a story, and would theoretically minimize situations where conference attendees choose not to attend a session because they have already learned about the paper in advance.
- An embargo policy may encourage media to attend the conference in order to meet with authors, learn more about the research, and incorporate audience feedback into their stories. Some media (e.g., *Inside Higher Ed*) send reporters to

cover the ASHE conference, but without an embargo policy, and at the risk of being scooped, they might not make the same investment.

CON (against embargoes):

- An embargo policy may prevent particularly timely or newsworthy papers from attracting a large audience since these sessions would not receive advance media attention.
  - Counter argument: There is nothing to prevent the media from highlighting an upcoming paper or session; the embargo only applies to the content of the papers.
- An embargo policy may not align with press timetables associated with ongoing research projects.
  - Counter argument: Under current policy, ASHE papers are already required to be original research that has not been published or presented elsewhere. Thus, the embargo only applies to the unique and original version of the research that is being presented at ASHE.
- An embargo policy puts restrictions on the timing of publicity for ASHE papers; some may argue that any publicity is good publicity, so why restrict the timing?
  - Counter argument: An embargo policy is not intended to limit publicity, but rather to encourage it by fostering a level playing field for reporters. In fact, not having an embargo policy may discourage publicity because a paper that is already covered by one outlet is less likely to be covered by subsequent outlets.

### **Recommendation**

In consideration of the above points, we recommend that ASHE enact an embargo policy for its annual meetings. A statement of the policy would be included both at the time of proposal submission and at the time of proposal acceptance. Specifically:

- The proposal submission portal should include a check-box indicating the author's understanding of the embargo policy. We suggest that the policy be included on the same screen where authors agree that their proposal is based on work that has not been published or presented at other conferences. We suggest the following wording to accompany a yes/no check-box: "If this proposal is accepted, the content of the final paper or presentation will be embargoed until the date and time of presentation at the (year) ASHE Annual meeting. This means that authors may communicate with the media about their papers in advance of the conference, but media coverage of the paper is embargoed until the date and time of the presentation."
- The proposal acceptance would include a reminder of the policy.

- ASHE would have a link on their conference website for “media” that would clarify the policy: “Online and print media coverage of ASHE papers and presentations is embargoed until the date and time of the presentation at the annual meeting.” ASHE should specifically reach out to major higher education media outlets to inform them of the change in policy.

### **Closing Comments**

We believe that an embargo policy is in the best interests of ASHE because it provides clear guidelines for when ASHE papers may be released to the public, a practice that may encourage greater visibility for our scholarship.

Our committee is uncertain as to the appropriate consequences when the policy is violated. It is possible that even when an author adheres to the policy and informs a reporter about the embargo, the reporter may still violate the embargo. Further, there are not presently clear consequences for authors who violate other conference policies, such as publishing or presenting their ASHE papers in advance of the conference. Instead of “policing” our colleagues, we envision these policies as organizational norms that we should all strive to follow. Nevertheless, if an embargo is known to be violated, we recommend that ASHE contact both authors and reporters to remind them of the policy.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, while beyond the scope of this report, we suggest that ASHE encourage higher education programs and individual scholars to work more closely with their university media relations office to promote their work. Such offices may be helpful in developing press releases in advance of the annual meeting and targeting such releases to the most pertinent media outlets. Yettick’s (2015) article (focused on the media and AERA) describes *Inside Higher Ed*’s senior editor Scott Jaschik as being “bombarded” by research briefs and press releases in advance of non-social science meetings, but receiving very few notices in advance of AERA. Yettick argues that in promoting work with the media, scholars need to “demonstrate that their work is relevant to specific localities...embrace simplicity and clarity” when communicating about their work (p. 182). We encourage ASHE to think about how best to engage in a discussion with ASHE scholars and program leadership about this issue.

### **Reference**

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<sup>2</sup> A more severe consequence for reporters would be prohibiting them (and/or their outlets) from receiving future embargoed press releases in advance of the ASHE conference. We do not believe such a practice is feasible for ASHE because the organization does not presently control media releases. Nevertheless, individual ASHE authors and their institutions may wish to impose consequences for embargo violations by limiting which media receive embargoed press releases in the future; this is standard practice in university media relations.

Yettick, H. (2015). One small droplet news media coverage of peer-reviewed and university-based education research and academic expertise. *Educational Researcher*, 44(3), 173-184.