

than can be handled within the current Parliament, before the next general election. So the fight for the attention of MPs will be crucial in the coming months. It is a fair bet that few of them, if any, have ever heard from constituents on this issue. But they do pay attention to their mailboxes, and there is now both an opportunity and a need for anyone concerned about these issues to help to ensure that essential legislative reform is seen through.

The good news is that all three of Britain's main political parties support such reform. Over the years, it has become increasingly clear that the burden of libel litigation falls too heavily on those who write about misconduct and bad practice. And with the global nature of the Internet, anyone outside the United Kingdom can sue anyone else outside the country using this law, provided that the libel was accessible to readers in the United Kingdom. Journalism on scientific issues has been acutely affected, and the need for reform and examples of problems within science were highlighted in these pages last year (see *Nature* 464, 1104; 2010).

At *Nature*, we have too often been hindered in our core mission because of legal risks. On one occasion we were unable to link to a university's website to point our readers to the outcome of a misconduct investigation, associated with the retraction of a research paper, because of a threat from the person found guilty by the university. There has been journalism about misconduct — central not only to the interests of *Nature's* readers but also to public trust in science — that we have decided not to commission, because we decided that the risks of costly libel action outweighed the undoubted significance of the stories. We will always pursue the most significant cases of transgression — on one occasion at very considerable legal expense. But there is a layer of less egregious yet still significant misconduct that we are not covering because of the risks of such costs.

Britain's coalition government has now introduced draft legislative

reform that would allow us to perform our core mission with fewer restrictions. Part of the problem with the existing libel laws is that they place a heavy burden of proof on the defendants and have little scope for a public-interest defence — areas that will be returned under the proposed reform.

Ministers responsible for the proposed changes specifically mention the freedom of scientific debate as one focus of their concern.

**“The attention of Members of Parliament needs to be sharpened now.”**

The changes and a consultation paper can be found at [go.nature.com/o3vw5r](http://go.nature.com/o3vw5r).

We at *Nature* will respond to that consultation. And we urge readers to respond to the detailed questions if they are seriously interested in strengthening the ability of scientists, journalists and others to report and comment publicly on misconduct or to speak responsibly and freely about problematic products or actions of large institutions and companies. The Libel Reform Campaign — a coalition of interested organizations — has published an initial response to the draft bill making clear their view of what further changes should be sought (see [go.nature.com/vdjvna](http://go.nature.com/vdjvna)).

The consultation process has a deadline of 10 June 2011. The bill will then be amended and formally introduced to Parliament for implementation in 2012. That will be another moment at which support for the bill will be crucial. But the attention of MPs needs to be sharpened now. To that end, readers in the United Kingdom should immediately contact their MPs to draw attention to the issue and to urge their support. The organization Sense About Science has published a template letter and MPs' contact details — see [go.nature.com/xrdcfx](http://go.nature.com/xrdcfx) and ask MPs to sign Early Day Motion 1636, tabled by Cambridge MP and scientist Julian Huppert and supported by cross-party colleagues. ■

## A unifying cause

*Conference of science journalists can strengthen ties between the Arab world and the West.*

With the recent awakening in the Arab world of movements for democracy and free speech, it is timely that the World Conference of Science Journalists (WCSJ), on 27–29 June, will for the first time be held in an Arab country. Even organizing the conference in Qatar has, in its own small way, promoted collaboration between the Western and Arab journalists involved. It can only be hoped that the mingling of science reporters at the event will have a similar, and lasting, effect. Western journalists attending the conference should take the opportunity to see the Middle East, meet its scientists and learn more about how science might contribute to sustainable development of the region, and the substantial challenges it faces, in particular at this crucial and historic moment in the region's history. Support for science in the Arab world has long been at levels far below those in other countries, although there have been some recent improvements (see *Nature* 470, 147–149; 2011). A twinning between the young Arab Science Journalists Association and the well-established US National Association of Science Writers in 2007 made the joint bid to bring the conference to the Arab world possible. That twinning also built powerful ties between science journalists in the Arab world and in the United States. Arab journalists were invited to American science and science journalism conferences, and American journalists attended the first Arab science journalists conference in 2008. There was much to learn for both sides as they shared challenges, advice and opportunities. It created mutual understanding between two regions that are often perceived as being at odds with one another.

It is a great pity, although understandable given the recent unrest and uncertainty in Egypt, that the organizers decided to relocate the conference from its original planned venue in Cairo to Doha in Qatar. It would have been symbolic to hold a major conference of journalists in a nation that has just overthrown the shackles of a dictatorship that repressed free speech and the critical thought and questioning that science and science journalism thrive on. But at least the venue has been kept in the Arab world, and has not been moved to the United States, which was discussed as an alternative venue at one point.

Holding the conference in Qatar will hopefully also provide a boost to science journalism in the region, which has suffered, as has all journalism and civil society, under authoritarian regimes. There are no dedicated science journalism courses in any of the universities in Arab states and, although there have been improvements, much of the science journalism there remains poor. The conference is a chance for Arab science journalists to rub shoulders with colleagues from all over the world and exchange their experiences. The connections made will be invaluable as science becomes more global. Many local and regional organizations are now thinking about projects they can put together to train and support science journalists. This will create a momentum to support the profession long after the conference has come and gone.

Past conferences have catered too much to Western issues, but this year's WCSJ, with a rich programme and speakers from more than 40 countries, promises to begin providing greater balance. Speakers from the Arab World, Africa, Latin America and Asia will give delegates greater insights into the science needs and challenges of the developing world. There is much reconstruction of civil society to do in the fledgling democracies of Tunisia and Egypt, and

science journalism can play its own small part in prompting debate on crucial science-based issues in every sector, as well as bringing greater scrutiny to the glaring needs in research and higher education. ■

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