

The Victor Cohn Prize for Excellence in Medical Science Reporting.

## About Victor Cohn

As science and medical reporter for the *Minneapolis Tribune* and then science editor, science and medical reporter and health columnist for the *Washington Post*, Victor Cohn distinguished himself for the clarity, honesty, robustness, fairness and effectiveness of his reporting. He was very much at the forefront of coverage of virtually every major advance in medicine over the last five decades, from the triumph of the Salk polio vaccine and the first human experiments with cancer chemotherapy to the eradication of smallpox and the manipulation of human genes.

He was the first triple winner of the Society of Professional Journalists' Sigma Delta Chi Award for newspaper reporting and the first two-time winner of both the National Association of Science Writer's Science-in-Society Award, and the AAAS-Westinghouse (now the AAAS-Whittaker Foundation) prize.

In 1959, Cohn co-founded the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing. In 1961, he was elected to a two-year term as president of NASW. Cohn is the author of several books, including *News and Numbers*, a widely used journalists' guide for interpreting and reporting statistical data in medical and scientific reports.

<http://casw.org/casw/victor-cohn-prize-excellence-medical-science-reporting-0>

## What makes a good medical reporter?

From the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing

The late Victor Cohn, a former science editor of The Washington Post, said:

*“A good medical reporter is, first of all, a reporter after a story, not just a medical story but an interesting and important story. A good medical reporter also has fun, fun talking to some of the world’s most dedicated and interesting people, fun writing copy that zings and captures the reader, fun that injects passion into the job, for it is a job that needs passion. A good medical reporter reports for people, not for doctors, not for scientists, not even for editors or news directors. A good medical reporter is privileged to contribute to the great fabric of news that democracy requires. There is no more important job than giving people the information they need to work, to survive, to enjoy life, to participate in and maintain a free and democratic society.”*

Source: Council for the Advancement of Science Writing.

<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/101219/What-makes-a-good-medical-reporter.aspx>

***News and Numbers: A guide to reporting statistical claims and controversies in health and other fields.* By Victor Cohn and Lewis Cope**

“Victor Cohn was a science writer for the Minneapolis Star Tribune for 20 years and then, for 21 years, a science writer for the Washington Post. His reporting was awarded just about all the journalists' highest awards for science writing. His reporting resulted in significant changes in public policy. He has often been called "The Dean of Science Writers". At age 79 Victor was diagnosed with a fatal disease. At that time he was in the middle of revising his book "News and Numbers" written in 1989 to help his fellow journalists understand and accurately report statistical issues. He enlisted the help of long time-colleague Lewis Cope, former science writer for the Star Tribune, to assist him in completing the book. Victor died at age 80 and, thanks to the work of Lewis Cope and his daughter Deborah Cohn Runkle, we have the second edition of his book.

Victor starting writing the first edition of this book when he was a fellow in residence at Harvard's School of Public Health. His mentor was Fred Mosteller. His experience working with Fred led him to consult other experts in statistical research and to include their advice in his book. This is a small book by modern standards and would win a prize for the density of wisdom per page among books on statistics.”

[http://www.dartmouth.edu/~chance/chance\\_news/recent\\_news/chance\\_news\\_10.08.html#item9](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~chance/chance_news/recent_news/chance_news_10.08.html#item9)

Teich's Tech Tidbit of the Week: July 16, 2001.

### **1999: Our Hopeful Future**

Victor Cohn (1920-2000) was the dean of American science-medical journalists. Starting out as a reporter on the Minneapolis Tribune in the 1940s, Cohn developed the craft of science and medical journalism as it is known today. He later served as a reporter and editor at The Washington Post for 25 years, before retiring in 1993. Cohn won many awards for his work, which included several highly-regarded books. One of these, *1999: Our Hopeful Future*, which he wrote in 1954, provides a fascinating perspective on how the future looked to technical experts at the midpoint of the 20th Century. Cohn interviewed scientists and engineers, mainly at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) and based his book largely on their ideas and expectations.

Some of the predictions that Cohn made were remarkably accurate. Others seem (from today's perspective) rather naive and far from the mark. Below are a few of Cohn's forecasts, together with links to sites with information that bears on them.

<http://www.alteich.com/tidbits/t071601.htm>

**Victor Cohn (1919 – 2000)**

*“The prophets of misery and robotism too often focus their sights on the cocktail party instead of the school. They describe the life of past generations in nostalgic terms, but do not really compare the lives of average housewives or factory workers today with the lives of their grandparents and with the drudgery, ignorance and poverty that characterized and blackened the past.” -- Victor Cohn, 1956*

Victor Cohn (undated photo of someone else according to his daughter, Deborah) Victor Cohn was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota on August 14, 1919. He was raised in a lower-middle-class home, the son of Louis Cohn, a traveling salesman born in Chicago and Lillian Cohn, a housewife born in Minneapolis.

Cohn began his career as a journalist at the University of Minnesota's student newspaper, The Daily, where he served as editor from 1940-41. He developed a passion for writing impactful stories that connected emotionally, as well as technically (as he largely wrote about science and health) with readers.

Victor Cohn was an optimist. The kind of optimist who dared say the future had potential, that there was a chance everything could turn out alright. It is an attitude I admire, largely because it's an attitude I so rarely share. The problems facing the world today feel insurmountable in many ways.

According to his son, Jeffrey Cohn, his father's analysis of news about advances in medical science was tremendously insightful. Victor Cohn said that every story fit into one of two categories -- new hope or no hope.

In 1954 Cohn wrote a series of twelve syndicated articles for the Minneapolis Tribune titled 1999: Our Hopeful Future. The series was expanded into a book in 1956 and follows the Future (with a capital "F") family; John Future, his wife Emily Future, and their

children, Timothy, Peter, Susan and Billy Future. The Future family goes about their futuristic business in a world free of the technological obstacles which faced mankind in the primitive 1950s.

Pre-Jetsons and pre-Star Trek, the book serves as a kind of beautiful time capsule in which we imagine a distant and alien world. Disposable clothes, solar and nuclear-powered everything, TV-phones, lightning-fast transportation; the future was looking pretty sweet.

But Cohn was not an unreasonable man. His technologically optimistic book was a vision of hope for a better world, whatever form that took. While studying yesterday's visions of tomorrow it's easy to forget that people of the 20th century were not all wide-eyed rubes who believed the future was pre-destined to be shiny, happy and plastic.

*Such prophets who fail to balance good against bad too often would have us merely shrink from the tools that new decades always bring, and thereby acknowledge defeat in what is admittedly going to be a difficult struggle. A difficult struggle is man's typical state. Reject change, and we will be enslaved by it; others will accept the worst of it and dictate to us. Accept change, and we may control it. We need the voices of our more balanced critics if we are to remember to look inside ourselves, not just crow about our surface achievements. But we need the voices of optimists too if we are to see a vision ahead, if we are to see what we can accomplish. -- Victor Cohn, 1956*

Thank you Victor Cohn, for reminding us that we must always be looking forward if we are to build a world where the "prophets of misery" are to be proved wrong.

Source: Wednesday, September 23, 2009  
[www.paleofuture.com/blog/2009/9/23/victor-cohn-1919-2000.html](http://www.paleofuture.com/blog/2009/9/23/victor-cohn-1919-2000.html)

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## OTHER BOOKS:

1999 Our Hopeful Future by Victor Cohn (Jan 1, 1954) Book in 1956 U Mn Press.

Four Billion Dimes by Victor Cohn (1955)

Sister Kenny: The Woman Who Challenged the Doctors by Victor Cohn (Jan 1, 1975)

Reporting on Risk: Getting It Right in an Age of Risk (Media in Society Series) by Victor Cohn (Mar 1990)

## Articles:

How to Help Reporters Tell the Truth. Delivered at the 1999 ASA JSM by Milo Schield (Vic was too sick to attend). Copy at [www.StatLit.org/pdf/1999CohnASA.pdf](http://www.StatLit.org/pdf/1999CohnASA.pdf).

How To Help the Public (and Yourselves) Know the Truth. Published in *Of Significance -- a Topical Journal of Association of Public Data Users*. Volume 1, Number 1 entitled "Statistical Literacy." Page 9-14. 1999.

"Probable Fact and Probable Junk" Victor Cohn provides six tests to help reporters discern between probable facts and probable trash. *A Field Guide for Science Writers: The Official Guide of the National Association of Science*, 1998.

VICTOR COHN. FALSE ADS CHARGED U. S. Impounds Millions of Birth Control Pills. Los Angeles Times. Jan 1, 1975, p A1

Victor Cohn, "Predictions of 1999 in 1954," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, January 1, 1999. Cohn's own reflections on his predictions from nearly half a century earlier.

From 50th Reunion Book, 2002 [For Lehigh University, Class of 1952] by Victor Cohn: [This is a different "Victor Cohn"] [www.seeoursite.org/Lehigh/c\\_d.htm](http://www.seeoursite.org/Lehigh/c_d.htm)