



Science Media Centre

*where science meets the headlines*



**ANNUAL  
REVIEW  
2010**

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# a letter from the director

The start of 2010 was marked by intense media interest in climate science after the series of events now known as 'Climategate'. The Science Media Centre's philosophy was built on seeing such media interest, however uncomfortable, as an opportunity as well as a threat, and we spent much of the time seizing these opportunities on behalf of climate scientists - running press briefings, placing opinion pieces and putting scientists forward for studio discussions (see page 5). While many scientists took part enthusiastically, the SMC also came across a new reluctance by others to enter the fray. Some turned down interviews for fear of being questioned on the detail of the University of East Anglia (UEA) emails or their view on whether Rajendra Pachauri should resign from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Even friendly journalists became increasingly frustrated by the failure of some climate scientists to engage with the crisis, and for a few months in 2010 the kind of tensions between science and the media that had led to our formation were back with a vengeance.

The SMC responded quickly and boldly. We produced a discussion document for climate scientists which urged them to reflect on lessons we had learned from 8 years of dealing with similar scientific controversies including GM crops and MMR. The 10 points stimulated much debate in climate science circles and led to our decision to run a special event for climate scientists in March. The event, sponsored by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and opened by Professor Alan Thorpe in the inspiring Faraday Lecture Theatre at the Royal Institution, attracted over 200 climate scientists and saw a stream of leading science journalists, climate scientists and press officers all making a powerful case for more effective engagement. Many of the climate scientists in the audience told us the event had completely changed their views.

One of the many media activities that resulted from that event was an SMC briefing with three of the authors of the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report, which had come under particularly intense scrutiny. Professor Martin Parry, then co-chair of the report's Working Group II, agreed to come to the SMC on the day another report was published by the Dutch Environment Agency claiming further errors. Martin's decision to gather his fellow authors around him at the SMC and address the criticisms in a room full of national news journalists was as bold as it was risky. Yet, as is so often the case, this openness and accessibility paid off. Every error cited in the Dutch report was addressed openly and robustly, and the journalists learned much about the process and inevitable constraints of producing IPCC reports. All the journalists who attended the briefing reported the Dutch report in a balanced and accurate way, quoting extensively from the three authors at the SMC, showing the enormous difference that can be made by scientists engaging even at times of high risk.

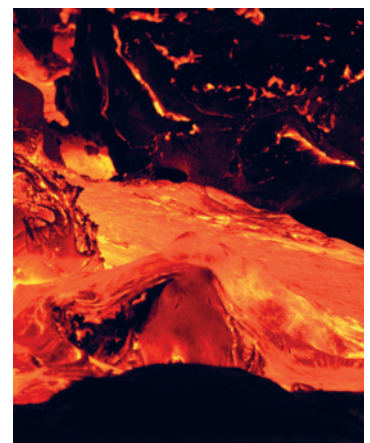
As well as helping climate scientists to engage with the intense media scrutiny around 'Climategate', the SMC was also the venue of choice for those appointed to lead investigations into the UEA email affair. Running the press briefings for the findings of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee inquiry, the Oxburgh Review and the Muir Russell Review, as well as co-ordinating the reaction to these reports by climate scientists, put the SMC even closer to the heart of this important science story. As 2010 ended with the integrity of climate science largely intact and public opinion polls showing high levels of acceptance of the basic science, the SMC could justifiably be pleased with the positive role the Centre played.

We were also especially proud of our role in helping scientists to get their voices heard on the importance of maintaining investment in science in the run up to the spending review. While science funding is not usually SMC territory, this year the massive public spending cuts planned by Government put the science budget centre stage and headline news. The SMC kept a constant eye on the news and seized every opportunity to issue comments from the science community - a process which reached fever pitch on the day the Business Secretary Vince Cable made his ill-fated claim that 45% of publically funded science is of inadequate quality. Together with the Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) the SMC ran a major briefing with 6 Vice-Chancellors from the UK's most prominent universities as well as Lord Martin Rees, then President of the Royal Society, which generated massive media coverage and ensured that the message that money spent on science is an investment and not a cost was littered throughout the national news media. For several weeks the Centre also answered media enquiries, placed opinion pieces and advised scientists on joint letters to the press.

It was fitting then that the Science Minister David Willetts should choose the SMC as the venue to announce to science reporters that the science budget had been spared the drastic cuts that many had feared. At that briefing Willetts openly acknowledged that one of the reasons the science budget had been spared the worst of the cuts was the extremely effective ways in which scientists had used their voice in the run up to the spending review - something the scientific community and the SMC can be immensely proud of.



Fiona Fox  
Director, Science Media Centre



# responding to breaking news

## Rapid Reactions and Round-Ups

A major component of the Science Media Centre's service is issuing expert responses to the biggest news stories of the day. When a science or engineering story hits the headlines, the SMC gathers comments and information from experts working in relevant fields and sends them out to journalists as **Rapid Reactions**. The Centre also issues statements to journalists when it knows a story will soon appear in the news; these **Round-Ups** are designed to give reporters the general background and context to an issue and may be quoted directly in their articles. In 2010, the SMC issued 138 Rapid Reactions and Round-Ups, each of which contained an average of 4 or 5 quotes, with over 600 individual expert comments sent out across the whole year. An average of 6 expert quotes were used in the media for each release issued in 2010, and they regularly resulted in experts being requested for follow-up interviews. Approximately 85% of all releases received media coverage, and around 15% were used widely across outlets.

# 138

Number of Rapid Reactions and Round-Ups issued by the SMC in 2010

## Focus On: Volcanic Ash

One of the biggest breaking stories of the year was the eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland, with the resulting ash cloud grounding aircraft across Europe for weeks. As ever, the SMC was right in the thick of it, running press briefings, organising interviews and issuing statements from experts at the most critical points of the story. The Centre issued 8 Rapid Reactions and Round-Ups on this story, featuring 226 individual statements from 37 experts covering everything from the science of volcanoes, potential health risks, the impact on aircraft, and how long it could be expected to last. As well as responding to over 50 media enquiries, Channel 4 News sent in their viewers' questions which were answered by experts and published within minutes on their website.

“Called this morning to say how absolutely wonderful and amazing the service was yesterday... and to say congratulations to all those involved.”

*Clive Cookson, Science Editor, Financial Times*

“Can I just commend you lot on pulling together a fantastic array of views on this volcano - more angles than you can shake a stick at!”

*Mark Peplow, News Editor, Nature*

## Focus On: Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico

The Deepwater Horizon disaster and the ensuing oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was another major story this year, described by some as the biggest environmental disaster in US history. The SMC was on hand to provide experts on every angle, from size estimates to the impact on marine life and the clean-up operation. The Centre issued 6 Rapid Reactions and Round-Ups and held a press briefing on the science of oil spills, and helped journalists with several features and packages, including a live Q&A on the Guardian website and other features for the *Daily Telegraph*, *Times* and *Financial Times*.

“This has been incredibly useful, and as you'll have seen we did get some comments in the paper today. Thanks very much for all your help.”

*Fiona Harvey, Environment Correspondent, Financial Times*

## Other stories that the SMC responded to in 2010:

**Cloned cow** Reports emerged that milk and meat from a cow bred from a clone had been on sale in the UK.

**Qantas flight** An Airbus A380 suffered engine failure while on a flight from Singapore to Sydney and was forced to make an emergency landing.

**Stem cell clinical trial** The US company Geron announced the first clinical trial of embryonic stem cells to treat spinal cord injury.

**Hungarian toxic waste** An accident at an aluminium plant in Hungary led to the spillage of thousands of cubic meters of toxic red sludge.

**Swine flu** This year's winter flu season brought a resurgence of swine flu in the UK.

**Science budget** Scientists responded to the impact of the Government's spending review on the science budget.

**Synthetic cell** US scientist Craig Venter announced the creation of the first synthetically produced genome and cell.

**Patient in a vegetative state communicates** Research published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* suggested that a patient in a vegetative state could communicate with researchers via brain scanning technology.

**Earthquake in Haiti** A magnitude 7 quake devastated large parts of the island, killing many thousands of people and leaving many more homeless.

**Aspirin and bowel cancer** Research suggested that a daily low dose of aspirin could reduce the risk of developing bowel cancer.





# setting the agenda

The SMC holds regular press briefings for the UK national news media, allowing experts to inform reporters about what are often the most controversial areas of science. Just over half of all briefings at the SMC in 2010 were **News Briefings**, focusing on the latest developments within research, and around a third were **Background Briefings**, designed to introduce journalists to a complex issue that might hit the headlines in the future. In the past year the SMC also continued to hold occasional **Expert Encounters**, giving journalists an opportunity to meet leading experts such as Dr Lyn Evans, former project leader on the Large Hadron Collider, Sir Andrew Dillon, Chief Executive of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), and the leading neuroscientist Dr Adrian Owen before he moved to Canada.

The SMC held 87 Press Briefings in total in 2010, each of which was attended by an average of 10 journalists. Approximately 95% of briefings resulted in media coverage, with news briefings receiving the most coverage. On average, each news briefing resulted in 11 or 12 articles and interviews appearing in the press, and around a third were covered widely across outlets.

“ I launched my new research at an SMC press briefing and was impressed with how it was organised and the coverage we got. There were journalists from all the main papers and they asked thoughtful questions. ”

Dr Seena Fazel, Forensic Psychiatrist, University of Oxford

# 87

Number of press briefings held at the SMC in 2010



## Key press briefings held in 2010:

**Interphone** Researchers from the UK arm of an international study into the potential link between mobile phone use and brain tumours briefed the media on their findings.

**Vitamin D consensus** In a bid to resolve confusion over health advice on vitamin D and exposure to sunlight, seven leading organisations signed up to a joint statement regarding the current scientific consensus.

**GM mosquitoes** Scientists discussed the results of the first field trial using genetically modified sterile mosquitoes to control the spread of Dengue fever, as published in *Science*.

**Academy of Medical Sciences review** The SMC worked with the Academy to launch the findings of a major review of the regulation and governance of health research in the UK.

**Swine flu - one year on** Experts discussed various aspects of last year's outbreak, including whether the reaction was appropriate and whether the UK is prepared for the next big virus that comes our way.

**Fertility tourism** Experts discussed the causes of patients going abroad for fertility treatment and whether concerns over their safety are well-founded.

**Nuclear waste disposal** Authors of a new report from the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority presented early plans for development of a deep geological storage facility for nuclear waste.

**Science budget** The heads of six major universities joined the President of the Royal Society to put the case for continued strong science funding.

**Bisphenol A** Senior toxicologists discussed the weight of evidence for a possible ban of the chemical Bisphenol A.

**Pain** Leading researchers on pain management brought journalists up to date with the latest developments in the field.

**New drugs group** The SMC hosted the media launch of former government drugs advisor Prof David Nutt's new Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs.

“ Thanks so much for hosting the briefing. We're really pleased with the coverage as well – it was great to have the opportunity to get the science behind mindfulness to journalists in person, and the results have been brilliant, calls coming in as I type! ”

Simon Loveland, Press Officer, Mental Health Foundation



# the year in focus

## Snapshot on... 12 Months of Climate in the Media

The state of the global climate remained high on the agenda throughout 2010, with the fallout from 'Climategate' continuing to be felt throughout the world. The leaking of thousands of emails from servers at the University of East Anglia's Climatic Research Unit at the end of 2009 led to new levels of scrutiny of science in general, and climate research in particular. The SMC was at the heart of the ensuing debate as it unfolded for much of 2010, responding to every major development. As well as rounding up expert reaction to breaking stories and responding to media enquiries from journalists, the SMC ran briefings to launch the findings of all three of the major inquiries into the contents of the hacked emails.

In 2010 the Centre issued 14 Rapid Reactions and Round-Ups on climate stories, each of which contained an average of 4 quotes; as a result, over 50 individual expert comments were sent out over the year. The SMC also held 14 press briefings on various aspects of climate change in 2010; as well as the press conferences for the three inquiries, the Centre held briefings on the question of 'where now' for climate science in the immediate aftermath of 'Climategate'; a review of detection and attribution of climate change by the UK Met Office; and the response of IPCC authors to a Dutch Environment Agency review of the Fourth Assessment Report. These briefings were incredibly well attended, and resulted in nearly 200 print and broadcast stories throughout the year.

In addition, the SMC helped place climate-related articles in the *Times*, *Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *New Scientist* and the BBC News website. The Centre also worked with Channel 4 News on a big climate Q&A for their website.



## Snapshot on... Mental Health Research

This year the SMC appointed a new press officer dedicated to mental health research; an area that does not receive as much media interest as other areas of science and medicine, and is often challenging to communicate to the news media. To get a better understanding of the area a consultation was carried out involving more than 60 meetings with mental health researchers, press officers and journalists, which found that:

- Many areas of mental health research receive little or no media attention;
- Too few mental health researchers engage with the news media;
- Mental health research provides an opportunity for better informed media coverage around mental illness.

The consultation found that journalists often don't hear about the topical debates going on in mental health research, so this year the SMC ran 8 press briefings on mental health including:

- High security mental health hospitals;
- Mental health and diagnosis;
- Mindfulness meditation for depression;
- Violent crime and mental health;
- A possible genetic component in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

An average of 9 news journalists attended these briefings and 79 national newspaper articles were generated. The Centre also issued 11 Round-Ups giving expert comment on new mental health research in the headlines, with 36 expert comments used in national news coverage. Other activities included setting up a mental health press officers network, running media training, giving talks and writing articles to encourage mental health researchers to engage with the media, and recruiting 50 new experts to the SMC database.

“ It is just the right time for you to start this job, we are starting to realise the importance of mental health research and the future looks exciting. There is also a growing sense from the academic community that we need to be engaging the public more.

*Prof Nick Craddock, Professor of Psychiatry, Cardiff University*

“ I would like to cover more mental health research – if the stories are there. Mental health is a hugely important and under-reported area – but it is a hard sell.

*Jeremy Laurance, Health Editor, Independent*





# working with the media

## Media Enquiries

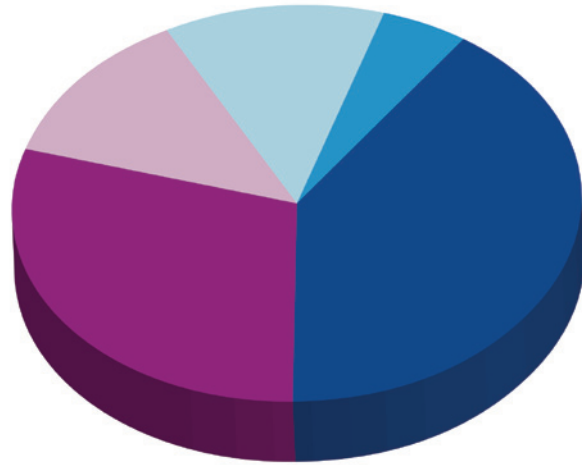
In addition to reacting to big, breaking news stories, and holding regular press briefings, the Science Media Centre also responds to daily enquiries from national news journalists looking for experts to interview and comment on a wide variety of issues. These enquiries range from journalists wanting an expert to appear on Newsnight, to needing someone to explain a complex scientific or engineering principle as background to a story. They can also involve providing the media with experts who can debunk the myths around a particular issue, preventing potential 'scare stories'.

In 2010, the Centre received over 600 separate enquiries, and was able to help journalists with their requests in over 97% of cases. Just under half of all enquiries came from broadcast outlets such as the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 News and Sky. In particular, one third of all requests came from various sections of the BBC, including television, radio and online news. The UK national newspapers accounted for just under half of all enquiries received by the SMC, with the *Times*, *Guardian*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* using the Centre most often.

## Features, Packages and Fact Sheets

As well as finding experts to take part in interviews or comment on specific topics, the SMC continues to assist journalists working on more extensive features and packages, helping them gather information and find several experts to interview over a number of weeks or even months. In 2010 the SMC worked with reporters on 27 such packages, including a *Guardian* piece on the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes, an article in the *Lancet* on proposed changes to the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), and a BBC News website piece responding to the outcome of the Cancun climate talks. The Centre also issued 11 Fact Sheets, giving reporters reliable key facts and figures on the latest news topics. These covered issues as varied as synthetic biology, oil spills, mitochondrial DNA and vaccines for tuberculosis.

## Overall Distribution of Media Enquiries



- National newspapers (254)
- BBC (national, regional, specialist) (186)
- Other media (79)
- Broadcast excl. BBC (ITN, ITV, Channel 4, More4, Sky)
- Newswires (AP, PA, Reuters)



Top Ten Individual Outlets	Number of Enquiries
BBC News*	131
Times & Sunday Times	54
Guardian & Observer	48
Daily Mail & Mail on Sunday	44
Daily Telegraph & Sunday Telegraph	42
Channel 4 News	30
Sky News	25
Financial Times	15
ITV News	15
Reuters	13

(\*including: BBC television and radio news, BBC TV News Channel, Radio 4 Today Programme, Radio 5 Live, BBC News website, Newsnight.)

## Introduction to the News Media

The SMC continues to run its hugely popular Introduction to the News Media event, designed to give those considering media work an idea of how to engage with the UK national news media. The Centre ran 3 events in 2010: one in Edinburgh in collaboration with the University of Edinburgh, one specifically for climate scientists in collaboration with the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), and one general event in London for scientists and engineers working on controversial or 'hot' topics. These events were well attended and resulted in many lively debates about why experts should even consider engaging with the media – with attendees leaving with a better understanding of the media and more prepared to engage.

## Other activities

In addition, January saw the publication of the Department of Business and Skills (BIS) report *Science and the Media: Securing the Future*, resulting from a working group chaired by the SMC Director Fiona Fox as part of the UK's Science and Society Strategy. The group's recommendations have been widely taken up and the SMC has continued to be involved in their implementation; examples include the appointment of a UK Science Journalism Training Coordinator, whose job it is to implement science training programmes in the newsroom and whom the SMC has been advising; and a training event for press officers who are new to science, organised jointly by the SMC and Stempra (the Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine Public Relations Association).

Finally, the SMC has also been feeding into the BBC Trust's review of impartiality in science coverage, chaired by geneticist and science writer Prof Steve Jones, with the task of assessing the accuracy and impartiality of the BBC's coverage of science, with focus on controversial issues like climate change, vaccines and GM crops.

## Engineering in the headlines

The SMC continues to promote engineering in the headlines and support engineers in engaging with the big stories. As well as putting engineers forward to comment on breaking stories, the Centre ran 13 briefings on engineering subjects throughout the year, including:

- A report from the Royal Academy of Engineering detailing the challenges facing the built environment in the 21st Century;
- An inquiry into the factors propelling us towards a global water crisis and how engineering can help to avoid it;
- A report from the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority that presented early plans for a deep geological storage facility for nuclear waste;
- A background briefing on smart meters and grids as a means of managing supply and demand of electricity in the UK.

The SMC also continues to advise engineers on working with the media and to recruit engineers to the SMC database of media-friendly experts.

## International SMCs

The number of Science Media Centres in other countries has continued to grow; the past year has seen the opening of Centres in Canada and Japan, with Denmark soon to follow, adding to the Centres already established in Australia and New Zealand. International collaboration between the SMCs has continued to increase, with plans under way to set up a more formal international network within the coming year.





# about us

Science Media Centre  
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The SMC has a small but expanding team of staff with expertise in both science and media relations. The team currently consists of:

Fiona Fox  
Director

Helen Jamison  
Senior Press Officer

Jonathan Webb  
Press Officer

*\* Jonathan has temporarily replaced Ed Sykes, who is spending a year working at the Australian Science Media Centre.*

Tom Sheldon  
Engineering Press Officer

Claire Bithell  
Head of Mental Health

Will Greenacre  
Science Information Officer

Selina Hawkins  
Office Manager & Fundraising Administrator

## Funding

The Science Media Centre currently has over 80 funders, reflecting the diversity of organisations that feel they benefit from the improved environment for science in the media that the Centre promotes in the UK. These include scientific institutions and universities, science-based companies, media organisations and government bodies with a stake in science.

In order to maintain independence from its funders, donations are capped at 5% of the running costs of the Centre, making the maximum single donation £22,500. The Wellcome Trust is the only exception to this, granting the Centre £30,000 per annum of core funding.

The Science Media Centre is also indebted to Mr John Ritblat and family for making the capital development of the Centre possible.

Abbott Laboratories  
Alzheimer's Research UK  
Associated Newspapers Ltd including Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Evening Standard and Metro  
Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC)  
AstraZeneca  
Bayer  
Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC)  
Boeing  
BP International Ltd  
British Pharmacological Society  
British Psychological Society  
Cancer Research UK (CRUK)  
Charlie Waller Memorial Trust  
Chemical Industries Association  
Chilled Food Association  
Coca-Cola  
Colgate-Palmolive  
Dept for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)  
Dept of Energy and Climate Change (DECC)  
Diamond Light Source  
Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)  
Elsevier  
Emergent Biosolutions Inc  
Engineering UK  
Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)  
ExxonMobil  
Food Standards Agency (FSA)  
The Gatsby Charitable Foundation  
GE Healthcare  
GlaxoSmithKline (GSK)  
Human Tissue Authority (HTA)  
Imperial College London  
Independent Climate Change Email Review  
Institute of Food Science and Technology  
Institute of Marine Engineering, Science and Technology (IMarEST)

Short biographies of the team are available at:  
<http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/pages/about/staff.htm>

The SMC also has an active volunteering programme for science students and early career researchers interested in gaining experience in science media relations. For more information please email [smc@sciencemediacentre.org](mailto:smc@sciencemediacentre.org).

Institute of Physics  
Institution of Chemical Engineers (IChemE)  
The Institution of Engineering and Technology (The IET)  
Institution of Mechanical Engineers (IMechE)  
International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI)  
John Wiley & Sons  
L'Oreal  
Marmot Review  
Mental Health Foundation  
Mental Health Research Network  
Mental Health Research Network Cymru  
Merck Sharp & Dohme (MSD) Ltd  
The Met Office  
Mobile Operators Association  
Motor Neurone Disease (MND) Association  
Monsanto UK Ltd  
Medical Research Council (MRC)  
National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE)  
Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)  
New Scientist  
News International Ltd including Times, Sunday Times, Sun and News of the World  
Novartis UK  
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Syngenta  
Technology Strategy Board  
Tate & Lyle  
UCB  
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