



Science Media Centre

where science meets the headlines

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news



Letter from Fiona Fox

Welcome to the first issue of the Science Media Centre's newsletter. I think I am right in saying that the SMC is unique in being a PR operation unencumbered with promoting its brand name. But as liberating as this is, it also means that many of you will not readily identify our role in the science stories that have recently been in the headlines. So the sole objective of this newsletter is to let you know what we have done and what we plan to do.

In just six months the SMC has successfully established itself as a reliable source for journalists, facilitated events praised for building bridges between scientists and journalists and shown that it is not only politicians and NGOs who can set the media agenda – all of which are detailed over the next few pages.

The SMC began life as a grand vision formulated by Baroness Greenfield and a prestigious Advisory Council. Transforming this into a reality demanded a clear focus and one that would be bought into by our key stakeholders. So we embarked on an intensive consultation exercise, talking to nearly 300 people, which is summarised in a comprehensive report available from the Centre.

One of the clearest things to emerge from this was the need for the SMC to concentrate its efforts on science in the headlines. Scientists, science press officers and journalists all agree that while scientists are getting better at talking about their research to specialist journals and correspondents, many continue to see science in the headlines as a threat rather than an opportunity. Whether it's GM, MMR or cloning most scientists would still rather be anywhere else than in the studio with John Humphrys or Jeremy Paxman. So while the Centre's activities are varied and wide-ranging, they always have this focus in mind. Meanwhile, our philosophy relies on getting the media to 'do' science better by getting scientists to 'do' the media better.

The great thing about running a new initiative is that we are open, enthusiastic and excited by new ideas, so please lobby us, criticise us or praise us. We hope you enjoy this rapid run through of what we are doing and planning and we look forward to hearing from you.

Fiona Fox
Head of the Science Media Centre



Where science meets the headlines

With our strapline, Where Science Meets the Headlines, it is hardly surprising that when a science story looms large over the news agenda the SMC really springs into action.

Since opening in April, we have been dealing with a host of headline grabbing stories: from MMR controversies to stem cell discoveries, from human cloning claims to Mexican maize disputes. When science hits the headlines you will find us responding to media enquiries, talking to scientists, setting up interviews and placing articles. However, we are usually hard at work before the story has broken, getting advance information from the many scientists and science press offices we know. Once we have identified a newsworthy story we canvass the scientific community for reaction, and get these quotes to newsdesks as swiftly as possible – we call these our ‘round up’ press releases.

These collated comments are featuring prominently in newspaper articles, and the broadcast media are using them to select potential interviewees. For example, we issued two round up press releases on Blair’s ‘Science Matters’ speech, resulting in interviews for ITN, 5 Live, Newsnight, Channel 5 News, The World Tonight and BBC News 24, and quotes in The Guardian, Financial Times and BBC Online. Another example was the House of Lords’ report on animals in scientific procedures, where alongside our quotes and quoters featuring in the national news media, The Times carried an article by Dr Mark Matfield placed by the SMC.

Our releases have been well received: scientists have easier access to the news media and the opportunity to give advance comment, journalists can get an overview of mainstream science reactions and producers can identify interviewees. Journalists are now approaching us looking for our ‘round up’ press releases in advance of covering a big science story.

‘It’s always good to have some handy potted British reaction’ James Chapman, Daily Mail

What they’ve said about us...

‘You’re bloody stars

‘Thanks so much for your help – the Science Media

‘This is such



Fields of Gold – the facts

With an eye on science in the headlines, we encourage scientists to embrace controversy rather than fear it. No sooner had our board acknowledged that this would occasionally get us into trouble, we found ourselves in the middle of a media row. Here is what happened:

What was Fields of Gold? A BBC drama about GM penned by Guardian editor, Alan Rusbridger and writer Ronan Bennett.

How did we get involved? We were approached by scientists seeking advice about the forthcoming drama. Amongst them was Dr Mark Tester, the programme’s scientific advisor, who felt that his recommendations had been ignored in favour of a scientifically implausible, sensationalist storyline. He and other scientists were asked to contribute to a wider science-debate around the thriller, prompting fears that it would be presented as science fact not fiction.

Why did we get involved? We agreed that the drama could spark off another media GM debate. Our role is to anticipate and prepare for science in the headlines and inject sound science into the media debate.

What did we do? We held a small private pre-screening of the drama with some leading plant scientists and promoted their reactions to a section of the media.

What happened? The Times and Telegraph seized on the story, running major articles quoting the scientists’ concerns, prompting angry features from the drama’s authors in The Guardian and Observer. This quickly developed into a media spat, with the SMC cast as a sinister lobby group for biotech business. We responded with letters to the Editor, correcting information about our funding, and a detailed Independent article outlining our role.

Should we have done it? Our board felt that the critical reaction was an inevitable result of helping scientists to set the agenda and being on the front foot on controversial issues like GM.



Would like to meet

Desperate journalist WLTM that special scientist for great interviews and snappy soundbites. GSOH and walks in the park optional.

Agreed, it is not quite a dating agency at the SMC, but our over the phone scientist search is proving popular with journalists, especially non-science journalists, who are frantically looking for an expert to talk to them about the latest piece of science news within their tight deadline. With a database brimming with media-friendly scientists and a plethora of science press officers, our journalist-scientist matchmaking success rate has been high, with all sections of the media using us, from Newsnight to Richard and Judy. And who said good relationships are hard to find?

‘It was a lifeline discovering that this service existed.’ Richard and Judy

for helping me with this! Thank you so much’ BBC Manchester

Centre scores again!’ You and Yours

‘This is a fantastic service, just great for people like us’ BBC4

an amazing service – I’ll certainly be using it again’ Maverick TV

Behind the news

It is not all instant responses and 10 minute deadlines. Our longer-term aim is to improve relationships between scientists and journalists and we believe that by co-ordinating sessions where the two can meet,

we can encourage an improved understanding and respect of each other’s specialities. Here are some of the ‘secondary activities’ we have hosted:



Learning lessons about MMR

At its height, the MMR media furore was as intense as the BSE or ‘Frankenfoods’ crises. Although a handful of doctors have suggested links between MMR and bowel disorders and autism, the vast weight of scientific opinion says the connection is unproven. Yet the public remains unconvinced.

Media coverage clearly affected attitudes to MMR. We therefore decided to bring together the journalists and scientists who had lived and breathed the controversy to discuss which communication strategies worked and which fuelled the debate. The 50 attendees included representatives from the Department of Health, the MRC, the PHLS, London hospitals, patient’s groups and the media.

We questioned how well the scientific community had coped with media interest around MMR and considered whether scientists are powerless before a news media that loves the minority view. We also analysed the media’s role in the affair and examined why certain angles were covered over others.

It was generally agreed that the media can heavily influence parents and health workers, placing an onus on journalists to report responsibly. It also means that if scientists want to communicate effectively with the public, they must first communicate effectively with the media.

For a full copy of the report, go to:

<http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/aboutus/MMRreport.html>

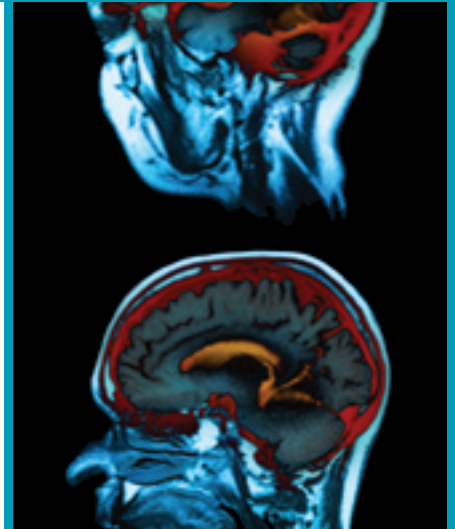


Communicating risk in a soundbite

‘Yes, but is it safe?’ This favourite in the interviewer’s portfolio of killer questions is what the SMC set out to answer in its first How Science Works session on risk. These sessions are designed to help scientists to communicate scientific method, as this can often prove a source of confusion for the public.

We brought together scientists, politicians and journalists, all experts in tackling the potential minefield of communicating risk. To begin, three brave volunteers faced Pallab Ghosh, BBC science correspondent, in mock interviews about HRT, MMR and rail safety. There followed a discussion about the effectiveness of using statistics, the merits of comparing risks and the value of adding a human touch to an interview. Participants contributed their favourite risk-related soundbites. Examples included ‘I’ve already done five riskier things today’, and ‘Having read all the research I would still eat it, drink it, swim in it and give it to my grandmother’.

We have now compiled a best practice guide for risk communication from this session which is available from the Centre.



Horizon scanning

No need for Mystic Meg to predict which science issues will hit the headlines over the coming months. MMR, global warming, cloning – it is probable that some or all of these will be courting major media attention.

Our Horizon Scanning series gives specialist and news journalists an in-depth briefing on science that they will undoubtedly be covering. Leading scientists give a glimpse into the future of their specialities and answer probing questions.

The first session covered brains and bugs, both ever-popular topics with the media, reflected by the presence of journalists from five national newspapers, the BBC and New Scientist. Baroness Greenfield discussed the future of brain mapping, while Professor John Oxford and Dr Armine Sefton dissected polio eradication, new vaccination schemes and antibiotic resistance.

Feedback was good and given that it is hard enough to tempt journalists to a press conference even with a great story, we were delighted that our first session was so well attended. Plans are underway for our next briefings.

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What next for the SMC?

In addition to dealing with science in the headlines, here is a taster of some of our activities over the coming months:

Genetics Meeting An informal discussion with our genetics contacts about the key themes, events and research that will project genetics onto the news agenda.

Introduction to the Media Media training with a difference; an introduction for scientists to how the news media works.

OST workshop The SMC is hosting a government science communication workshop.

Communicating Animal Research

A brainstorming session with 10 expert communicators to discuss strategies for communication about animal research. The results of this meeting will be published in a best practice guide.

Horizon Scanning Prof Adam Finn and Dr David Elliman on multiple vaccines.

Crop Trials Meeting A meeting with our GM contacts to consider the impending media coverage of the crop trials' results.

Biodiversity Briefing A briefing for journalists about biodiversity with Lord May and Professor John Lawton.

ABSW Briefings We continue to work with the ABSW on their monthly science briefings for science writers.



Science-media events

Housed in the Royal Institution, the SMC has a beautiful central London venue that is available free of charge for anyone looking to host an event connected to science and the media. The SMC is equipped with an ISDN line, PowerPoint and Internet access and has a capacity for around 40 people, making it the perfect place for small press conferences, interviews, briefings, launches, media training etc.

So if you need a free venue to hold your science-media event, please call the SMC on 020 7670 2980.

For further information concerning anything mentioned in the newsletter, please visit our website, www.ScienceMediaCentre.org or email Becky at bmorelle@ri.ac.uk



Science in a Nutshell

We cannot expect all news journalists to have swallowed a science encyclopaedia, especially when they are juggling the latest science breakthrough with the war in Afghanistan and the most recent Big Brother exploit. So to make their lives easier we are busily preparing a series of 'Science In a Nutshell' guides to serve as an introduction to areas of science that are repeatedly covered by news journalists. These crib sheets will provide an overview of the jargon, details about who the key players are, an outline of any wider implications of the research, and where to go for more information. Our first, 'Human Genetics in a Nutshell', will be hitting a newsdesk near you soon.

Thank you to our funders for making our first 6 months possible

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