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Science media centers & the press, part 1

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By Connie St Louis and Fiona Fox

Does the UK model help journalists?

With a mission to provide the press and the public with high-quality scientific information and sources, the Science Media Centers in the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan have become influential, but controversial players in the world of journalism. While some reporters find them helpful, others believe they are biased toward government and industry scientists.

This three-part series will examine the role that the original center plays in the UK, the performance of the centers during the Fukushima nuclear crisis, and the proposal to launch a Science Media Center in the US. For each installment, two writers were asked to submit opening statements replying to the question in the headline. They exchanged those statements and wrote short replies.

In Part 1, Fiona Fox, the director of the SMC in the UK, and Connie St. Louis, the director Science Journalism MA program at City University London and president of the Association of British Science Writers, respond to the question: "Does the UK model help journalists?" Parts 2 and 3 will be posted on Wednesday and Friday.

Fiona Fox, opening statement:

When Cherie Blair, the wife of the former British Prime Minister, opened the SMC back in 2001, she did little to win over a group of skeptical science journalists by suggesting that the new center would help them do their job properly. As well as irritating the reporters, Cherie missed the point that the center was not being set up to help journalists, but to support more scientists to engage effectively with journalists. The SMC's founding philosophy reflected this focus on fixing science rather than fixing journalism, stating that "The Media will 'Do' Science Better when Scientists 'Do' the Media Better," and to this day I still invoke Pallab Ghosh, the BBC science correspondent, telling scientists to stop winging from the side-lines, learn the rules of the game and get onto the pitch.

But while the SMC's mission may be to help renew public trust in science, I believe that in doing so we help journalists as well. By facilitating more scientists to enter the fray, we have made it much easier for journalists to access the best science in a timely manner. During crises like Fukushima, or on complex and politicized stories like 'Climategate', the SMC proactively offers great experts for interview, quotes from leading scientists, reliable factsheets, and press briefings where journalists can question experts in the middle of an unfolding story. This easy and early access helps science journalists to report stories accurately and in-depth, and crucially gives them an advantage in the newsroom when general news editors are circling around a science story.

Outside times of crisis, the center helps journalists in different ways. 'New' in a newsroom means news. 'New' in science means preliminary and unproven. By asking third party experts to put new research into its wider context by commenting on the strengths and weaknesses of the study in question we help journalists to work out whether a study deserves the front page splash or a nice cautious piece on page eight. Sometimes there are wildly different views about the same study so there is still plenty of need for journalistic judgment. But often things are more clear cut, with a range of experts reminding journalists that a new study is preliminary, small, only done in mice and not worthy of

headline news. On other stories the opposite happens, and the unanimously positive reactions we issued from five renowned stem cell experts to the recent Mitalipov paper in *Cell* probably helped to guarantee its front-page splash. Journalists particularly appreciate this work, with Richard Black, the BBC's respected former environment correspondent once saying, "for many the Science Media Centre is a vehicle to help reporters negotiate the minefield of churnalism and public relations".

And almost all the UK news science journalists make use of SMC press briefings held weekly at the Wellcome Trust. Some are with groups of leading scientists answering questions on topical controversies like shale gas or bisphenol A. Others explain where we are with emerging viruses like Schmallenberg or H7N9. And some are run because a new study is especially complex or statistics heavy and we want to get the authors in a room with the journalists to thrash out what can and cannot be accurately claimed.

There are other ways we help journalists that are more hidden and hard to quantify. The SMC has spent ten years working behind the scenes to persuade the scientific community to speak out on their use of animals in research. And we have lobbied government furiously to do more to encourage their own scientific advisers to talk to journalists during times of crisis. Once again, the motivation for the SMC is to remove any barriers between the public and these great experts, but having us constantly chipping away at institutional barriers to openness can only help journalists to get to the truth more easily.

So, yes, the SMC does help journalists, though we do so in pursuit of projecting more accurate, evidence based science into the public domain rather than in pursuit of a good story or generating more coverage of science. The fact that this 'help' often keeps stories out of the media or pushes them off the front pages may not always delight news editors. The fact that the science reporters actively seek and welcome this perspective is a credit to their integrity and desire to get it right.

Connie St. Louis, opening statement:

A decreasing pool of time-pressed UK science journalists no longer go into the field and dig for stories. They go to pre-arranged briefings at the SMC. It is a science PR agency that sets the science journalism agenda. In any other area of journalism this practice would be ridiculed. Imagine the consequences if political journalists behaved in this way.

Has ten years of the UK SMC, which was founded on the back of the MMR scandal by 'concerned scientists,' helped journalists? Without wanting to demonize a PR organization for expertly filling the void whilst journalism re-orientates and re-configures to find a new business model for "kick-ass" journalism, the answer must be "no." The SMC is guilty of fuelling a culture of churnalism in science journalism.

It has cast biased press briefings such as one on GMOs, funded by Monsanto and invited unwitting and time-starved journalists. The results have been catastrophic. The quality of science reporting and the integrity of information available to the public have both suffered, distorting the ability of the public to make decisions about risk. The result is a diet of unbalanced cheerleading and the production of science information as entertainment. Perhaps the greatest tragedy, or item of public interest, has been the complicity of successive scientifically illiterate UK governments, which have donated nearly half a million pounds of public funds to this dishonest endeavor.

However, the truth is that more and more SMCs are springing up around the world. The question must now be, how can an SMC that is a press agency for science help science journalists? Here are nine suggestions that might contribute towards an agenda for reform:

1. Reverse the culture of churnalism by not writing press briefings with quotes, but return to the important role as facilitators, enabling time-poor journalists to access scientists.

2. Ensure that press briefings are cast in a way that includes other voices in science. This means not creating a false balance that has occasionally been a characteristic of the climate change debate, but allowing the public to hear a range of opinions.

3. Change the name to a science press agency, so non-scientific reporters who are increasingly accessing the SMCs, understand its context; in the UK context, the term "SMC" is very misleading.

4. Change the SMC access policy, which currently favors only a small subset of journalists, and make it available to all via video conference or webinars. This will widen access to all regional and freelance journalists not just the London-centric national journalists.

5. Reform the funding model. Demonstrate an ethical robustness and transparency by refusing to take government money. The government is double spending on science communication: once via the SMC and again through the funding grants that it gives to UK science research.

6. Openly acknowledge that science needs robust journalism, not just cheerleaders. Science needs a type of journalism that calls it to account and is not afraid to cover it critically. Journalism isn't the mouthpiece of science. Reports have a specific role and responsibility in society.

7. Help scientists to develop a charter that doesn't lobby government. The SMC should not lobby government and refuse to give a platform to scientists that interfere with political decisions.

8. Appoint at the highest level a science journalist who understands journalism and its role, to lead and run all SMCs.

9. Last, but perhaps most importantly, promote transparency in science and talk about the dark side of science: the elephant in the room. Work with journalists who are trying to investigate and expose the dark. As public trust in science decreases, science needs a human face. It is a human endeavor, not one carried out by demi-gods. This means that there is lying, cheating and corruption, where careers are made or broken by whether or not they publish in one of the global 'ivy league' journals and obtaining the biggest grants.

Fiona Fox, reply:

While I share many of Connie's concerns about the dearth of original and investigative reporting on science, I cannot share her increasingly unflattering characterization of the UK's national news science journalists. Having previously described them as 'docile creatures' spoon-fed by the SMC, they are now painted as 'unwitting' individuals captured by the SMC's agenda and slavishly turning up to 'cast biased briefings' secretly funded by GM companies.

In Connie's world, any sense of journalistic integrity and judgment has been lost as specialist reporters turn cheerleaders for science with catastrophic consequences for the quality of reporting. This would indeed be terrible if true, but Connie displays her own bias by ignoring all those who feel that UK science journalism is far from catastrophic.

There are, however, several things we can agree on. Connie can rest assured that our role as facilitators remains a core part of our work, and even a cursory glance at our website will show that we give voice to a huge range of different views - most recently on contested issues like DSM-5 or bees and pesticides. But we are not about to reinforce the 'he-said-she-said' false balance by trawling our universities for climate skeptics or plant scientists who take issue with GM. Yes, that means the SMC is not always the best place for journalists to come for the outliers, but let's face it—the media don't generally struggle to find them, much to the frustration of many scientists.

Neither is it true that science reporting is all about churn. The SMC has worked with journalists on many original stories, most recently exposing the horrendous campaign of harassment against chronic fatigue syndrome researchers and breaking the news, hidden from public view for 10 years, that the UK's airlines and ferry companies had completely withdrawn from transporting animals for research after threats from animal rights activists.

We agree we should find new ways to offer our services to more journalists and a growing number of regional and freelance journalists do now have access. However, I disagree with dismissive comments

about us catering to a 'small subset' of journalists. The entire national news media is a large and hungry beast and, critically for us, reaches a mass audience. At a time when many institutional press officers are bypassing the mass media, the SMC is more committed than ever to ensuring this group gets access to the best science.

Chasing small donations from over 100 different bodies including universities, charities, companies, media groups, trusts and government is painful and time consuming, so I welcome ideas about reforming our funding model. However, I can think of few organizations that are more independent from funders than the SMCs. We do not make editorial decisions in return for funds and have never run a briefing in return for sponsorship from Monsanto. Whilst Connie would like us to reject government money, others would prefer we take less from business. The reality is that having such a wide variety of sources as well as an upper cap on donations is a healthy model, which protects us from undue interference or control.

I wholeheartedly agree that science needs quality journalism that calls it to account and is not afraid to report science critically. Misrepresenting the work of SMCs will not get us any closer to this goal.

Connie St. Louis, reply:

Perhaps the most important outcome of this exchange is the clarity it may offer about the role of the UK SMC. It has been acknowledged several times by the SMC that it is a science PR agency that lobbies government, i.e. it is a science advocacy group. It is very important to have clarity on this, and to understand and acknowledge the Centre's underlying motivation and strategy. This aim does raise the question as to why the UK government is giving money to the SMC to lobby itself. Wasted public money.

Richard Black, the former BBC environment correspondent quoted in your piece, in an interview for this piece also said, "The Science Media Centre is too influential and clearly has an agenda that is far too partial." [**Update:** Black disputes that he said this, although St. Louis stands by the quote.]

Unfortunately, the BBC is also, guilty of being 'PR-ed' by science. If you visit the science section of the BBC Academy, College of Journalism website (if you are based outside the UK there is a pay wall) you will hear Fiona speaking for science and talking about the values of science. She says, "I think the whole business of news values is fascinating, I have worked in NGOs, in politics, in overseas aid agencies; never have I detected more of a culture between the way two groups of people work than I have with scientists and journalists and this is a great example of this. So that when a journalist discovered that a commonly used vaccine might cause autism…"

The information given is not only incorrect but represents the worst kind of misleading PR spin. So to be clear a journalist didn't say that the MMR vaccine causes autism. A fraudulent and corrupt medical scientist did. Why hasn't the BBC, who I have informed about this incorrect statement, taken it down? The conclusion must be that the BBC is too beholden to science and it PR agency.

Fiona's piece overstates the importance of the SMC in helping science journalists to navigate scientific findings. There are no science journalists in the UK that I know who do not understand how to report a preliminary and small study done on mice, or indeed other papers published in a range of scientific journals. It's one of the first things that we teach our budding science journalists studying towards the MA in Science Journalism at City University London.

There is growing evidence that the existence of SMCs is also encouraging news organizations to downgrade science reporters. Recently the newspaper The Australian sacked its science reporter, Leigh Dayton. The reason she was given by the editors was "they could rely on the supply of press releases from the Australian SMC so that their general reporters could write the science news." *[Ed. note: Australian science writer and publicist Niall Byrne reports that Dayton denied having said this during an appearance in July at the World Conference of Science Journalists in Finland.]* A large empirical study carried out recently by Andy Williams of Cardiff University, UK also confirmed that science PR was increasing and independent science journalism was decreasing.

Richard Black also says “In an ideal world we wouldn’t need science media centers.” My riposte to that is that there is no such thing as an ideal world, and even in an imperfect one we don’t need science media centers.

Fiona Fox and Connie St. Louis collaborated on this article. Fox is the founding director of the Science Media Centre in the UK. She has a degree in journalism and 25 years of experience working in media relations. St. Louis is director of the MA program in science journalism at City University London and president of the Association of British Science Writers. Tags: PR, science communications, Science Media Centers, scientific integrity, SMC

http://www.cjr.org/the_observatory/science_media_centers_the_pres.php