

“ Journalists and scientists have not always had a happy relationship. There is a need for them to be more at ease with each other  
*Professor Robert Winston* ”



ALL THE SCIENCE HORROR STORIES SERVED UP FRESHLY

# The Scaremonger

BRITAIN'S TOP TABLOID TELLING LIKE IT IS! Tuesday, Feb

FULL COLOUR CARCINOGEN PUL

## SCIENTIST CLONES CHICKEN

FOOD A  
SAY LEA

By our Science correspondent  
Denise O'Malley

In an exclusive report published today by the Department of Health scientists at a press conference in London that food additives were completely safe.

FULL ST



IST has been the first ever to clone a chicken produce a super chicken

By Damian DeVille

Scientists say it will help them produce a new breed of 'super chickens' that will lay ten times more eggs than conventional broiler birds. The embryos will also be used in research into debilitating conditions such as red hair, grey spots and fat arteries which cause avoid suffering and distress to millions of women.

Potential

The team will be led by Dr. Anita Haller of the International School of Embryology and a team of microbiologists from the University of Ulsan in Kygyoryonkyo—in some other unpronounceable place with no vowels in its name.

ED GOVERNMENT MEMO WA  
RBUG EPIDEMIC SWEEPING

# Science and the Media: poles apart?



Rebecca Morelle, of the **Science Media Centre**, makes a plea for scientists to stand up and be counted in the eyes of the Public and to start seeing media interest in science as an opportunity, rather than a threat

**I** RECENTLY attended a meeting about science and the media which began with the audience of scientists being asked to outline their thoughts on the media. What was supposed to be a five minute session grew into a forty-five minute barrage of criticisms and complaints: ‘They’re too sensationalist; they get their facts wrong; they misrepresent views; they hype’—were just a very few of the comments made by scientists.

But reverse this question and visit a newsroom. The criticisms from the journalists towards scientists come just as thick and fast. ‘They don’t speak in English; they won’t return calls; they expect special treatment for science; they won’t give a straight answer’—the list goes on.

The relationship between science and the media could, at best, be described as fraught. But could this conflict arise from the fact that one probably couldn’t have two disciplines that are more different?

A scientist will spend years researching a single area of science; spend months writing a paper and then wait for it to be peer reviewed, before it is finally published. When the news of this research lands on a journalist’s desk, they will get a few hours to turn a lifetime’s worth of work into a few hundred words of copy.



A scientist will think in terms of probable outcomes, risk factors and competing theories. A journalist will want absolutes, yes or no answers, and will see any debate in science as the battle between two polar opposites.

A scientist will want to stick to the science and avoid delving into the areas of

politics and ethics. A journalist will bypass the technicalities and go straight to why it matters, how it will be applied, and what the potential repercussions are.

Yet, despite these differences, more and more scientists are realising the importance of engaging with the media, and the **Science Media Centre** is both a product of and catalyst for this changing relationship.

## The Science Media Centre Arrives

The roots of the **Science Media Centre** can be found in the highly influential House of Lords report on Science and Society, published in 2000. It examined why levels of trust in science and scientists were decreasing. Gone were the glory days where scientists were trusted, respected and admired—an unprecedented period was being entered where their authority was being questioned, especially after the very publicly played out furores over BSE and GM food. ▶



One of the areas looked at was the media coverage of science, and after hearing evidence from both journalists and scientists, the report concluded by calling upon someone, somewhere, to do something to improve the relationship between these two desperately different disciplines and at the same time to do what seemed like an impossible task of “adapting science to frontline news.”

The **Science Media Centre** was the result. It launched in April 2002, but before opening its doors for business a three-month consultation exercise was carried out to try and find out what this very special something to improve these relationships should be. After speaking to around three hundred scientists, journalists, press officers and politicians, a consensus emerged. While scientists were doing well at talking to publications like *New Scientist*, or *Nature*, or to programmes like the now defunct *Tomorrow's World*, when science grew legs and moved onto the front pages of a newspaper—think MMR, cloning, or GM—scientists were just not coming forward to speak to the media, often leaving vacuums which were very quickly filled by other more media-savvy groups. It became clear the centre's efforts should be focusing on science at the times when it dominates the news agenda; this was where the centre could make a real difference.

The centre is best described as a press office for all of science, but when science hits the headlines, ensuring that the voices, news and opinions of the scientific community are heard at these key times. Housed in the Royal Institution, although independent from it, the centre runs with four staff, and has its own board, science advisory panel and funding

(the centre is funded by a diverse group of sponsors, from media groups, to research councils, to industry, but no sponsor can give a more than five percent of our running costs to maintain our independence).

Our activities can be roughly divided into three areas: our work with journalists, our work with scientists, and our work where we try to bring the two groups together.

### Working with journalists when science is in the headlines

The **Science Media Centre** aims to make it as easy as possible for the news media to cover science well, and we do this by giving them easy access to the best scientists for their particular story. Working from a database of well over 1000 scientists and over 500 science press officers, we aim to make sure the news media can reach the scientists they need within the timeframe they're working within.

This means, at our most straightforward, we are able to provide a service whereby a journalist can call us to find a scientist to talk about the latest science story, and we are able to provide the right person whether it is for the GMTV sofa, or a Paxman-style confrontation.

However, the centre strives to be much more proactive than this, and if a science story is dominating the news agenda, we will find the scientists who are relevant, available, and happy to give up their time to speak to the media, and then we will contact every single newsdesk to make sure that they know this. Encouraging scientists to engage with the media at these key times has often made a real and important impact on how a science story has been covered.

Take, for example, the announcement this summer that a research group in Newcastle had been granted a licence to clone human embryos for stem cell research. It was an important

step forward for science, but would the public think of it in this way, or rather as a the slippery slope to playing God? By ensuring that the media had access to scientists who could comment on why this research was being done, where it could lead, and to address some of the ethical issues, the public were also able to access these opinions.

Or take last January's human cloning announcement for Panos Zavos. When Zavos came to town early one Saturday morning to announce to the press that he had successfully cloned a human, the centre located the scientists who could give up some of their weekend, and talk to the media. As more and more scientists went to the media, the message that the public were hearing, via the news, changed from '*scientist claims to have cloned human*' to '*scientists condemn cloning claim.*'

### When science and the media meet

While the sort of reactive process just described is very much led by the news agenda, our activities also include helping scientists to have a hand in shaping and influencing the news media, which we do through our regular press briefings. The briefings are targeted at national science, health or environment correspondents, and cover all areas of science, but generally fit into three different categories.

Some of the briefings are best described as background briefings, where a panel of scientists will brief journalists on an area of science before it has hit the headlines, giving the media basic information about a new research area and also access to great contacts. Our 'backgrounder' nanotechnology briefing in 2003 introduced journalists to this new area a few weeks in advance of the now infamous



headlines about Prince Charles' worries about grey goo, and influenced the subsequent coverage.

Some of our briefings are better described as giving scientists a platform to speak out about a certain issue—the rational being to encourage scientists to use the media as a tool for conveying important messages. When we heard of scientists' worries about the impact that the new Human Tissue Bill could have across all areas of research, the centre organised a briefing where four scientists spoke to the media about their concerns. Until this point, the media and hence public, were completely unaware of this issue, but by embracing the media, the scientific community was able to successfully put across its point.

Our third type of briefing is where scientists can brief the press on new research, and we have run briefings ranging from the launch of the results of the hugely important, both scientifically and politically, Farm Scale Evaluations on GM crops, to this years news that scientists had discovered a new species of hominid (christened by the media *'The Hobbit'*) in Indonesia. The briefings form an important part of the centre's remit, and are popular with both scientists and journalists.

### Working with scientists

We are a centre that was set up by the scientific community, and because of this it is our belief that to get the media 'to do' science better, scientists need 'to do' the media better. And this means working with the scientific community not only to encourage them to engage more, but also helping them out when they do. Last November the **Science Media Centre** held a pilot event for scientists entitled *'Introduction to the Media.'*

Over two hundred scientists came to London to spend an afternoon being immersed in the culture of the news media, hearing from journalists at *The Times*, *The Sun* and the *Today Programme* on the realities of the news machine, and what scientists should want out of it and expect from it. After some very positive feedback we have now decided to turn it into an annual event. The fact that the event was so popular indicates that more and more scientists are beginning to see the importance of engaging with the news media, and this should be seen as an encouraging sign.

The centre has also been encouraging scientists to use their news interviews to get across some information about the way science works. The fact that nothing can be 100% safe, or that scientists disagree; or why they use some oddly named process called peer review, is common knowledge to a scientists, but often leaves the public confused. We have worked

with scientists, press officers and journalists to create a series of pocket sized media guides for scientists, with key phrases that they can use to talk about risk: 'so tell me Prof, Bloggs, is it safe?'—or peer review; 'well, Prof Bloggs, just how can we trust this research?' We will be tackling scientific uncertainty in our next one. In addition to these guides, we have also produced a leaflet for scientists talking about the important but difficult issue of animal research in a media interview. They are free and available from our website.

### It's down to the scientific community to make things better

We live in a climate where public opinion counts for a lot. It can have a direct impact on the policy decisions that are made, and these policy decisions can have a direct impact on your research. And the public are getting more and more interested in, and concerned with, developments in science. A MORI opinion

poll that the centre commissioned to mark it's opening showed that over 90% of the public get their information about science, not from popular science books, or science lectures, but from the mainstream media. The public's interest in science is even more marked when science hits the headlines; when a report linking the MMR vaccine to autism is all over the front page of *The Sun*, millions of readers are suddenly very interested indeed in this area of science.

Scientists now have to argue the case for what they are doing more than ever before. Ducking away from the media at the times when the public are most interested in science can have very serious consequences, but rolling up your sleeves and getting stuck in can make a real difference to how a news story is covered, and to the message that the public will receive. The science media centre has been working hard to champion the effort of those scientists who stand up and be counted in the eyes of the public. We believe that it is time to start seeing media interest in science as an opportunity rather than a threat.



#### Further Information

Please visit:  
[www.sciencemediacentre.org](http://www.sciencemediacentre.org)

**Rebecca Morelle**  
Senior Press Officer  
Science Media Centre