



# Centre *of* attention

*Fiona Fox and her Science Media Centre are determined to improve Britain's press. Now the model is spreading around the world.*

BY EWEN CALLAWAY

Depending on whom you ask, Fiona Fox is either saving science journalism or destroying it. But today, she is touting its benefits to a roomful of reluctant scientists. “Your voice has to be heard,” the charismatic and sometimes combative head of Britain’s Science Media Centre (SMC) tells the audience of more than 70.

Most of these scientists work at the UK Food and Environment Research Agency (FERA), a sprawling government laboratory based in York, which studies hot-button issues such as pesticides and genetically modified (GM) crops. FERA scientists have a reputation for being closed to the media and, this May afternoon, Fox is trying to convince them to open up. “You’re not alone, it’s scary out there,” says Fox.

That is a message that Fox has honed well since establishing the SMC in London in 2002. The centre’s aim is to get scientific voices into media coverage and policy debates — and by doing so, to improve the accuracy with which science is presented to the public. It tries to do this by providing select journalists with a steady flow of quotes and information from its database of about 3,000 scientists, and by organizing around 100 press briefings a year. “Our philosophy is we’ll get the media to do science better when scientists do the media better,” says Fox.

All this means that when science makes the news in the United Kingdom, the SMC has often played a part. Scientists adore it, for getting their voices heard. And many journalists appreciate how the non-profit organization provides accurate and authoritative material on deadline. But Fox and the SMC have also attracted some vehement critics, who say that they foster uncritical media coverage by spoon-feeding information to reporters, that they promote science too aggressively — the SMC has been called ‘science’s PR agency’ — and that they sometimes advance the views of industry.

Regardless, the SMC model is now spreading around the world, with the latest franchise slated to open in the United States around 2016. The centres are all run independently, but they abide by a unified charter crafted by Fox. This means that Fox is about to take her message to a much wider audience. “I think there are problems with her reach,” says Connie St Louis, director of the science-journalism course at City University London and one of Fox’s loudest critics. “She’s becoming one of the most powerful people in science.”

### THE PUBLICITY BUG

“I’m basically a press officer” is the first thing that Fox says about herself. After completing a journalism degree in 1985, she took a media-relations job with Brook Advisory, a London-based charity that provides reproductive health advice to young people. Days after she started, a member of parliament proposed increasing restrictions on abortions, and things kicked off. “It was an exciting six months — we were in the national spotlight all the time, on TV, in the national news,” says Fox. “I got the bug.”

Fox went on to other media-relations positions, first in a group working for one-parent families and then in one promoting international aid, but by the late 1990s she was ready for a change. She looked around to see what was making the headlines, and found that many of them came from messy issues in science.

One of the messiest had blown up on 10 August 1998, when Britons woke up to headlines screaming that GM potatoes were a danger to their health. Árpád Pusztai, a toxicologist at the Rowett Institute of Nutrition and Health in Aberdeen, had told a television programme about his unpublished research showing that an experimental GM potato, never intended for human consumption, could damage the immune systems of rats. The British public and media were already highly sceptical of GM food, and the ‘Pusztai affair’ pushed things into hyper drive. GM crops stayed in the headlines for the next two years, and some sections of the British press actively campaigned against them.

At the time, most scientists buried their heads, hoping that the furor would subside, even as a few scolded the media for its poor grasp of complex scientific issues. The press, they grumbled, had already raised unwarranted concerns about food safety during the 1996 scare over mad cow disease, and had dangerously undermined public health when, in 1998, it reported on a link between vaccines and autism that was later debunked. “It was a bit of a war out there,” says Fox.

In 1999, the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology responded by launching an investigation into the role of science in society. It concluded that “the culture of United Kingdom science needs a sea-change, in favour of open and positive communication with the media”, and aired the idea of a new institution to sit on the front lines, independent of the government and media. That idea took shape as the SMC.

When Fox read about plans for the centre, she saw a media-relations opportunity. She applied to lead it and soon landed an interview with a panel that included *Nature’s* editor-in-chief Philip Campbell and Susan Greenfield, then director of the Royal Institution, Britain’s oldest science-outreach organization. Fox was offered the job the next morning. “I knew it would have to be someone who was quite tough,” Greenfield recalls. “We had to have her.”

In March 2002, as the centre got under way, Fox and her team released something of a manifesto, stating that the SMC would be “unashamedly pro-science”, would “operate like a newsroom” and would be “free of any particular agenda within science”. It also stipulated that a single donor could provide no more than 5% of the SMC operating budget, to ensure the centre’s independence. That rule that still stands today, with a few exceptions, including London-based biomedical charity the Wellcome Trust and the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which last year provided 6.3% and 6.6%, respectively. Industry funding — from donors including Procter & Gamble, agribusiness firm Syngenta and GlaxoSmithKline — makes up about one-third of the SMC’s budget. In the past two years, Nature Publishing Group has given the SMC a total of £10,000.

At the start, the SMC made some prominent stumbles. In early 2002, the organization learned that the BBC was to air a drama called *Fields of Gold*, in which experimental GM crops are linked to mysterious deaths amid an industry cover-up. Fox got hold of an advance copy, invited leading scientists to a viewing — complete with free popcorn — and sent their reviews to reporters. “Then the shit hit the fan,” Fox says.

Robert May, then president of the Royal Society, called the film “an error-strewn piece of propaganda” and some newspapers echoed his and other scientists’ criticism. The film’s two writers, one of whom was Alan Rusbridger, editor of newspaper *The Guardian*, hit back, accusing the SMC of being a pro-GM mouthpiece for the companies that fund it. The same criticism has been aired since, in part because the SMC gives voice to scientists who favour GM and other commercial applications of research. But Fox argues that the cap on dona-

tions insulates the centre from undue influence.

Early on, Fox and her staff also had trouble developing relationships with general reporters in the print and broadcast news, who, they believed, needed the most help covering science. The centre created laminated cards that read, “If you need a scientist, phone us”, and posted them to newsrooms. “We’d phone them up and ask them if you got the card, and of course they said, ‘Fuck off, I’m busy,’” Fox says. So the SMC instead began reaching out to specialist science and health reporters, and found them far more receptive. “We give them an advantage in their newsroom. When a big science story breaks, we are helping the science correspondents stay on the story,” says Fox.

The centre started to get scientists on board too, by offering to act as a trusted conduit to the press. Today, Fox and her staff of seven work hard to identify researchers who can speak on topical issues, and to make

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their comments more insightful for reporters. Avoiding unwanted contact with the media is one of the SMC's major selling points to scientists. "If you're on our database, we never ever, ever hand your number to a journalist," Fox told the FERA scientists in York.

Perhaps the biggest criticism of Fox and the SMC is that they push science too aggressively — acting more as a PR agency than as a source of accurate science information. In December 2006, for example, the UK government indicated that it planned to ban scientists from creating hybrid embryos containing cells from humans and other animals. A public consultation had found unease with the research, and early media coverage tended to focus on the ethical concerns, quoting critics such as members of the Catholic clergy.

Researchers, funders and scientific societies organized a campaign to change the government's mind. The SMC coordinated the media outreach, hosting five briefings at which scientists played down ethical qualms and said that hybrid embryos were a valuable research tool that might lead to disease treatments.

The resulting media coverage reflected those views, according to an analysis of the campaign's effectiveness commissioned by the SMC and other campaign supporters. More than 60% of the sources in stories written by science and health reporters — the ones targeted by the SMC — supported the research, and only one-quarter of sources opposed to it. By contrast, journalists who had not been targeted by the SMC spoke to fewer supportive scientists and more opponents. The SMC was "largely responsible for turning the tide of coverage on human-animal hybrid embryos", says Andy Williams, a media researcher at the University of Cardiff, UK, who carried out the analysis. (The eventual bill would allow hybrid-embryo research.) But Williams now worries that the SMC efforts led reporters to give too much deference to scientists, and that it stifled debate. "It was a strategic triumph in media relations," he says.

Members of the scientific community are quick to go to bat for the SMC. One of those is Val Summers, the regulatory-affairs associate at lab-animal supplier Harlan Laboratories, based in Blackthorn, UK. Harlan is a target of animal-rights activists, and the company's long-standing policy has been for its employees not to speak to the media. But in 2011, *The Sunday Times* newspaper contacted Harlan about a story it planned to run on animal cruelty at the company's dog facility. At Fox's urging, Harlan and Summers hosted a reporter and a photographer from the paper at the facility. "She's given me the confidence to speak out," Summers says of Fox.

## DAILY PRESENCE

Fox and the SMC are now a routine part of the day for many British journalists. Some attend the centre's frequent briefings, which are often chaired by a smartly dressed Fox. And more than 300 reporters — including some at *Nature* — receive the SMC's daily strings of e-mails.

On 21 May, for example, the day after a tornado killed two dozen people in an Oklahoma town, Ian Sample, *The Guardian's* science reporter, was assigned a fast-turnaround story on the science of tornadoes. That day, the SMC sent him three e-mails containing tornado facts and comments from 11 researchers, many addressing the controversial link between extreme weather and global warming. Sample worked the material into a story, and called some of the scientists for more detail. "That information was really handy," he says.

Sample is less comfortable working this way when it comes to

controversial topics. "It's a really dangerous thing and an easy thing for journalists to start relying on SMC comments," he says. "We should be picking who we're talking to and picking which questions we're asking."

That over-reliance has been highlighted by St Louis. In the latest spat, a forum article last month on the website of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, St Louis accused the SMC of "fuelling a culture of churnalism". Because journalists have started attending SMC briefings rather than digging for stories, she wrote, "the quality of science reporting and the integrity of information available to the public have both suffered".

Fox disputed the charge, pointing out that the SMC works with journalists on original stories. She has no qualms about the centre's success or its promotion of science. "We were set up to get the voice of science in the debate," she says. And she bristles at the idea that the SMC feeds lazy journalists canned quotes. "There is nothing canned, processed or simple about this," Fox says. "I can't see why it's so much purer for a journalist to phone their contact at Sussex University than to phone the SMC and get us to do it."

## GLOBAL MEDIA

Science media centres inspired by the British one have already opened in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Japan, and more are planned in Germany, Denmark and France. But an SMC in the United States — with its vast, fragmented media and bitter controversies over certain scientific issues — may provide the fiercest test of Fox's model.

Last year, at Fox's urging, Julia Moore, a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington DC, set up an exploratory committee for a US SMC. Moore has since started fund-raising: "It's going full steam ahead," she says. The US centre will focus more on helping journalists to reach scientists than the other way around, as its UK counterpart does. "They need help writing stories about the latest research on stem cells or climate change or the latest controversy on evolution," says Moore.

Ivan Oransky, head of the health team for news agency Reuters in New York, does not think that the well-sourced journalists with whom he typically works will need such help, but he says that

local newspapers and websites without that expertise could use an SMC. Still, he worries that such a centre could end up having an undesirable influence on the news. "If it's a force for smoothing over some of the legitimate disagreements that scientists have, if it is a force for putting science in the best possible light because of who the funders are, I don't think it's really doing all that much," he says.

Fox says that she hears every day from people seeking advice on how to set up and run a science media centre. But the part of her job in which she takes the most pride, she says, is convincing once-timid scientists to join the SMC database and speak out. "A real triumph for us is getting a scientist who has worked for 30 years on a really controversial issue and has never spoken to the media," she says.

The FERA scientists, however, are going to take more persuasion. Even after a half-day workshop and a wine reception, only five researchers sign up. But Fox is undeterred, pointing to workshops at other institutes, where she has had vastly more success. "Ten years ago, when we started, lots of people were like that, scared of the media, scared of getting in trouble with government," says Fox. "That's no longer the case." ■ SEE EDITORIAL P.126

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UK coverage of hybrid-embryo research included more scientists' voices (top) after efforts by the Science Media Centre.

BOTTOM: METRO; TOP: MIRRORPIX