

Science Media Centre

The **Science Media Centre** (SMC) calls itself "an independent venture working to promote the voices, stories and views of the scientific community to the national news media when science is in the headlines."^[1]



This article is part of the [Foodspin](#) project of [SpinWatch](#).

The SMC began work in December 2001. It is housed within the [Royal Institution](#) (RI).

[Susan Greenfield](#), the RI's former director, described herself as the "midwife"^[2] of the initiative while the support of the former UK science minister, Lord [David Sainsbury](#), has been noted in articles about the SMC.^[3]

Staff

[Fiona Fox](#), Director, is said to be in overall charge of running the Centre and setting its strategic direction together with the [SMC's Board](#). Fox's background, which includes undisclosed links to the [Living Marxism](#) network, is mainly in media relations.

Corporate donations

Despite its close links with the RI, the SMC describes itself as 'an independent venture'.^[4] Prior to its launch, Greenfield said she hoped to get money for the project 'from the trade unions' (Financial Times, Jan 30, 2001), but that never materialised and most of the SMC's funding is via corporate donations. Funders with biotech interests include [AstraZeneca](#), [DuPont](#), [Monsanto](#), [Pfizer](#), [PowderJect](#), and [Syngenta](#).

Controversy and criticism

Within a matter of months of its launch the SMC was already embroiled in controversy over its activities. On the issue of genetically modified (GM) foods, it stood accused of operating '[a sort of Mandelsonian rapid rebuttal unit](#)', and of employing '[some of the clumsiest spin techniques of New Labour](#)'. These claims arose out of allegations of a 'secret campaign to discredit' a BBC drama relating to GM crops (see: [Lobby group 'led GM thriller critics'](#), The Observer, June 2, 2002). The connections of the director of the SMC to the [Living Marxism](#) network, and the SMC's funding, have also attracted critical comment. The SMC provides a link from its home page to the [Progress Educational Trust](#) as a "source of information about assisted conception and genetics", a body which has made Fiona Fox an adviser and has other links to the LM network through current and former staff.^[5]

Dr David Miller of the Stirling Media Research Institute is amongst the SMC's critics. He is quoted in an article in *The Guardian* as saying:

The Science Media Centre (SMC) is... not as independent as it appears. It was set up to provide accurate, independent scientific information for the media but its views are largely in line with government scientific policy. The SMC made much of its charitable status, yet its charity number is the same as that for the Royal Institution (RI); in other words, it is almost synonymous with the RI. Similarly, its independence was supposed to be guaranteed by the fact that no more than 5% of its funding comes from any one source; yet 70% of its funding comes from business, which could be said to have similar interests. The SMC has since had the ac.uk removed from its email address after complaints that only academic institutions that were not corporately funded were entitled to this were upheld.^[6]

In a critique of the SMC in *Nature* journal, the science policy journalist Colin Macilwain said the SMC "offers the media a clearing house for scientific briefings and packaged quotes from scientists" and commented on plans to set up a Science Media Centre in the US:

The London SMC's narrow approach to risk assessment — if you want to hear about the risks of nuclear power, say, just ask your local nuclear engineer (see *Nature* 471, 549; 2011) — sits happily with the prevalent ethos of British journalism. This was, of course, immortalized by the otherwise-obscure poet Humbert Wolfe: "You cannot hope / to bribe or twist, / thank God! the / British journalist. / But, seeing what / the man will do / unbribed, there's / no occasion to."^[7]

Macilwain goes on to question whether the SMC is even needed in the UK, given that

the British press — led by the BBC, which treats the Confederation of British Industry with the deference the Vatican gets in Rome — is overwhelmingly conservative and pro-business in its outlook. It is quite unperturbed by the fact that SMC sponsors include AstraZeneca, BP, Coca-Cola, L'Oreal, Monsanto, Syngenta (as well as Nature Publishing Group) but not a single environmental non-governmental organization (NGO) or trade union.^[8]

Genetic modification

The SMC describes itself as 'working to promote the **voices, stories and views** of the scientific community to the news media when science is in the headlines' (emphasis added). It also says it's in the business of 'pro-actively promoting a **spectrum of scientific opinion**' (emphasis added).

This language is derived from a [Consultation Report](#) on its role, published by the SMC in March 2002 and said to have been the result of wide consultation with leading scientists, science communicators and the media. The topic of GM comes up repeatedly - almost 20 times in a report which in full only runs to around 30 pages including appendices.

Revealingly, the report notes that 'the majority of people consulted - including many of those who helped establish the initiative... reminded the SMC team several times that the impetus for the initiative came from people who are concerned about improving the image of science and renewing public trust in it. They also pointed out that the impetus for the Centre emerged from a strong consensus that media coverage of such issues as GM and BSE had been "bad for science".'

In a *Financial Times* article published a full 15 months earlier, the emphasis is similar, the role being planned for the Centre would be to help 'sceptical and impatient journalists' get their stories right on controversial issues such as 'animal research, cloning and genetically modified food' (*New independent media centre aims to give scientists a voice*, *Financial Times*, Jan 30, 2001)

In an [article co-authored by Greenfield](#) in the Independent, we are also given a clear account of the motivation behind the Centre, 'The reduction of a complex branch of biological engineering to "Frankenstein food" was typical of media hopelessly ill equipped to discuss scientific progress rationally. And into the vacuum stepped big business. What inflicted the greatest damage on GM science was that the case for the defence was fronted by the bio-tech groups [Monsanto](#) and [AstraZeneca](#).'

If this suggests the SMC's role is to replace the biotech industry as the champions of GM, then the [Consultation Report](#) contains a more reassuring quote from Greenfield, 'The SMC is unashamedly pro-science but it is also independent of any particular agenda. That means the SMC will provide access to the wide spectrum of scientific opinion on any one issue. We can provide an anti-GM scientist and a pro-GM scientist... etc, etc.'

This chimes in precisely with the SMC's promotion of itself as being 'free of any particular agenda within science' and as striving '**to promote a breadth of scientific opinion - especially where**

there are clear divisions within science' (emphasis added).

Yet the SMC has never provided the views of anything remotely resembling an anti-GM scientist in any of its press releases on GM stories, which are typically made up of a list of quotes from what appear to be a range of scientists. By contrast it has been happy to host the press launch of the [Agricultural Biotechnology Council](#) (ABC) - the public relations campaign for GM foods set up by the biotechnology industry. Similarly, it regularly included comments from [Stephen Smith](#), when he was the head of the ABC and of the biotech company Syngenta Seeds UK, along with those of other 'scientists' in its GM-related press releases. The comments it includes in these are invariably supportive of GM or are critical of research raising questions about GM, and some of the comments come from scientists with significant but undeclared conflicts of interest. [For example](#), in more than one of its press releases those who are part of industry-funded lobby groups, like the scientists who work with [CropGen](#), are presented as simply a 'Reader in Ecology' or a 'Visiting Professor of Biology' without any mention of their lobby-group affiliations. By contrast, in the SMC's [Consultation Report](#) the SMC not only does not hesitate to identify one of these scientists as 'Professor [Vivian Moses](#), Chair of [CropGen](#)', but only identifies him as such (eg p.27).

Greenfield, when the director of the Royal Institution, was on the Advisory Board of the mostly industry-funded [Social Issues Research Centre](#) (SIRC). Together with the SIRC, Greenfield, on behalf of the RI, co-convened a Forum which laid down guidelines for the media - guidelines which had largely originated with the [Royal Society](#) - and which called for the establishment of a secret directory of 'expert contacts' with whom journalists should check out their science stories prior to publication.

The Science Media Centre was to be a new body 'less encumbered by past perceptions' - almost certainly an admission that the [Royal Society](#)'s reputation had been damaged by allegations of its operating a media rebuttal unit in relation to the issue of GM foods. [Sense About Science](#) appears to have been set up for similar reasons. Like the Science Media Centre, the director of [Sense About Science](#) was also drawn from the [Living Marxism](#) network. Interestingly, in the SMC's Consultation Report the Chairman of [Sense About Science](#), Lord [Dick Taverne](#), was among those who 'argued that the SMC should try to identify spokespeople who could display the same levels of passion and conviction as the campaigning NGOs.'

Funding

The centre states that it is "independent from any single scientific body. To preserve our independence, funding has been sought from a wide variety of sources, none of which have contributed more than 5% of the total running costs (£250,000 per year). Media groups, industry, professional associations and individuals are all taking part in funding the Science Media Centre."[\[9\]](#)

August 2012

An update for the year August 2011-2012 included nuclear industry funders [EDF Energy](#), [Energy Solutions](#) and the [Nuclear Decommissioning Authority](#) (NDA) [\[9\]](#)

March 2012

An update of November 2011 added the [Mobile Manufacturers Forum](#) to the list of SMC funders. [\[10\]](#)

February 2007

The following is a list of SMC funders to Feb 2007:[\[11\]](#)

As of 2010:

Funders include GM firms [AstraZeneca](#), [Monsanto](#) UK, [Novartis](#) UK, and [Syngenta](#); and nuclear body, the [Nuclear Decommissioning Authority](#) (NDA).^[12]

As of Feb 2007:

- Abbott Laboratories
- AAAS and the magazine Science
- ARM Holdings Plc
- Associated Newspapers Ltd (ANL) including Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Evening Standard & Metro
- Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC)
- Association for Science Education (ASE)
- [AstraZeneca](#)
- [BASF](#) Plc
- Biotechnology & Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC)
- Blackwell Publishing Ltd
- British Computer Society (BCS)
- British Embassy in Washington
- British Geological Survey (BGS)
- British Neuroscience Association (BNA)
- British Psychological Society (BPS)
- [BP](#) Plc
- [Cadbury Schweppes](#)
- Cancer Research UK
- Coalition for Medical Progress (CMP)
- Chemical Industries Association (CIA)
- Chilled Food Association (CFA)
- [Chiron](#) Vaccines
- Colgate-Palmolive Company
- Confederation of the Food and Drink Industries of the European Union (CIAA)
- Copus
- Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils (CCLRC)
- Daily Express
- Department for Trade and Industry (Office of Science and Innovation)
- The [Dow Chemical](#) Company
- The [Drayson Foundation](#)
- [Economic & Social Research Council](#) (ESRC)
- [Elsevier](#)
- Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)
- Engineering and Technology Board (ETB)*
- Environment Agency
- [European Science Foundation](#) (ESF)
- Euroscience Open Forum (ESOF)
- [ExxonMobil](#)
- [GlaxoSmithKline](#) (GSK)
- Human Tissue Authority (HTA)
- Imperial College, London
- Institute of Food Science & Technology (IFST)

- Institute of Marine Engineering, Science and Technology (IMarEST)
- Institute of Physics
- Institution of Chemical Engineers (IChemE)
- Institution of Electrical Engineers (IEE)
- Institution of Mechanical Engineers (IMechE)
- [Kraft Foods Inc](#)
- Medical Research Council (MRC)
- [Merck Sharp & Dohme Limited \(MSD\)](#)
- The Met Office
- Mobile Operators Association (MOA)
- National Physical Laboratory (NPL)
- Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)
- Nature Magazine and Macmillan Publishing Group
- News International Limited
- [Nirex](#)
- Particle Physics & Astronomy Research Council (PPARC)
- [Pfizer Limited](#)
- The Physiological Society
- Research Councils UK (RCUK)
- RDS
- [Rothamsted Research](#)
- Royal Academy of Engineering
- Royal Astronomical Society (RAS)
- The Royal College of Pathologists
- The [Royal Society](#)
- The Royal Society of Medicine
- [Sanofi Pasteur MSD](#)
- [Shell Chemicals Limited](#)
- [Siemens Plc](#)
- Smith & Nephew Plc
- Society for Applied Microbiology (SfAM)
- Society for General Microbiology (SGM)
- [Syngenta](#)
- [Tate & Lyle Plc](#)
- [Trinity Mirror Plc](#)
- UCB Group
- UK Cleaning Products Industry Association (UKCPI)
- [Unilever](#)
- University of Teesside
- [Vodafone Group](#)
- [Wellcome Trust](#)
- [Wyeth](#)

Previous funders (prior to Feb 2007):

- [Allied Domecq](#)
- [Beeson Gregory](#)
- [BBC Worldwide](#)
- [British Energy Plc](#)
- [British Land Plc](#)

- British Transplantation Society Council
- [Conoco](#) (UK) Ltd
- Conoco-Phillips
- Co-operative Group (CWS) Limited
- Dixons Group Plc
- The [Drayson Foundation](#)
- [DuPont](#) (UK) Ltd
- [Eli Lilly](#) & Company
- JH Ritblat Charitable Trust
- [Lever Faberge](#)
- [Merlin Biosciences](#)
- [Northern Foods](#)
- The [Posen Foundation](#)
- [PowderJect](#)
- [QinetiQ](#)
- [Rathbones](#)
- [Regenesys](#)
- [Royal College of Physicians](#)
- [Science Council](#)
- [Simon Best](#)
- [Tesco](#) Limited

March 2002

Sponsors of the SMC listed in a SMC Consultation Report of March 2002 are:[\[13\]](#)

[Beeson Gregory](#) | [BP-Amoco](#) | [British Energy](#) | The [British Land Company](#) | [Conoco](#) | [Co-op](#) | [Dupont](#) | [EPSRC](#) | [Merlin Biosciences](#) | [Pfizer](#) | The [Posen Foundation](#) | [PowderJect](#) | [Royal College of Physicians](#) | The [Science Council](#) | [Smith & Nephew](#) | The [Society for General Microbiology](#) | [Tate & Lyle](#) | [Tesco](#) | [Trinity Mirror](#) PLC | Dr [David Moore](#) | Dr [Geoff Andrews](#)

Communicating risk to the public

The SMC published a leaflet, "Communicating Risk in a Soundbite", in circa 2002. It calls the leaflet:

a guide for scientists, doctors and engineers preparing for a broadcast interview, and is the result of a meeting between top scientists and journalists in July 2002. They assessed the best ways to explain risks via the broadcast media, and suggested a whole host of examples. It is not meant to be a definitive 'best practice' guide - we simply want to offer a choice of effective ways of answering questions about safety and risk.

Note that the guide is intended for use in situations where risks are perceived to be much higher than they actually are. It is not intended to help cover up significant risks or threats to public health.[\[14\]](#)

Members of the public who read the advice given in the guide may well find it alarming as it actually seems to be about minimising risk in the eyes of the media and thence the public. Examples of possible questions and ideal answers include the following:

Q Is it risky?

A 'Not very. The benefits outweigh the risks.' The interviewer then has little choice but to ask you about the benefits.

A 'It is a very small risk. So small that I believe it is safe.'

A 'To most people, safe doesn't mean 'no risk', it means 'negligible risk' – so I believe that this is safe.'

A 'Whether or not something is safe will always be a matter of weighing up the risks and the benefits – no-one has ever proved that something is safe.'

A 'Nothing is completely risk free – but we can assess all the evidence and decide that something is safe enough.'

Q Will investment make it safer?

A 'If we plough money into reducing these tiny risks, then for every one person it benefits 1000's of others may suffer because the money has had to be diverted from somewhere else.'[\[15\]](#)

The guide appears anti-scientific in its advice to avoid admitting a lack of knowledge about risks:

Don't say, 'These risks are unquantifiable' or 'unknown'.

Try, 'It's difficult to say, because ...', or, 'At the moment it's not absolutely clear, but we're trying to find out by doing X, Y and Z.'[\[16\]](#)

Participants in the meeting that gave rise to the guide include people who have developed a reputation for reassuring the public about risky, controversial, or unpopular technologies such as MMR vaccinations and genetically modified food. They include:[\[17\]](#)

- Prof Sir [Colin Berry](#)
- [Pallab Ghosh](#)
- Dr [Evan Harris](#)

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Notes

1. ↑ Science Media Centre, [Welcome](#), acc 22 Sept 2012
2. ↑ [Consultation Report](#), Science Media Centre, March 2002, p. 13, accessed 28 Sept 2009
3. ↑ eg, *New independent media centre aims to give scientists a voice*, Financial Times, Jan 30, 2001)
4. ↑ Science Media Centre, [Welcome](#), acc 22 Sept 2012
5. ↑ [Home page](#), Science Media Centre acc 13 Mar 2011
6. ↑ John Crace, [Peer trouble](#), The Guardian, February 11, 2003, accessed 29 Sept 2009
7. ↑ Colin Macilwain, [Two nations divided by a common purpose](#), Nature 483(7389). 14 Mar. Accessed 19 Sept 2012
8. ↑ Colin Macilwain, [Two nations divided by a common purpose](#), Nature 483(7389). 14 Mar. Accessed 19 Sept 2012
9. ↑ [9.0 9.1 Funding](#), SMC website, accessed 20 September 2012
10. ↑ SMC (2012) [About Us](#)

11. [↑ Current Funders/Previous Funders](#)], SMC website, version placed in web archive 13 Jan 2008, accessed in web archive 28 Sept 2009
12. [↑ SMC, 2010. Annual Review](#). Acc 16 May 2011.
13. [↑ Consultation Report](#), Science Media Centre, March 2002, p. 25
14. [↑ Communicating Risk in a Soundbite](#), Science Media Centre, 2002(?), acc 2 May 2010
15. [↑ Communicating Risk in a Soundbite](#), Science Media Centre, 2002(?), acc 2 May 2010
16. [↑ Communicating Risk in a Soundbite](#), Science Media Centre, 2002(?), acc 2 May 2010
17. [↑ Communicating Risk in a Soundbite](#), Science Media Centre, 2002(?), acc 2 May 2010

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