

Evaluation of New Zealand Science Media Centre

July 2008–July 2009

DECEMBER 2009



FILE REFERENCE: SW14-09-01

DATE: DECEMBER 2009

PUBLISHED BY THE

MINISTRY OF RESEARCH, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The consensus of the media and the science sector representatives interviewed is that SMC has been very effective in deepening media coverage of science as well as raising media awareness of scientific issues. Many respondents reported that they believed the quantity and quality of media coverage had increased since the advent of the SMC.
- 1.2 In terms of financial management, the SMC has in place all the financial elements necessary for an effective organisation. The SMC's operational expenditure appears relatively modest and also appropriate for its type of operations.
- 1.3 Looking ahead, the challenge for the SMC is to go beyond the achievements of its first year and focus its future work on fostering a broader understanding among the media of the role of science in a modern society and economy.
- 1.4 As a result of this evaluation, MoRST recommends that:
 - the SMC, in consultation with the RSNZ, the advisory board and MoRST, develop a strategic and business plan that will focus future activity on areas that will have the greatest impact on improving the breadth and depth of media coverage of New Zealand RS&T.
 - the SMC pay particular attention to strengthening links with research organisations, and that
 - the SMC and the RSNZ continue to actively explore options for future funding including a move towards co-contribution or a form of public-private partnership.

2. Context

- 2.1 As part of MoRST's strategy, 'Engaging New Zealanders with science and technology', the Ministry established the SMC to "improve the breadth and depth of media coverage of New Zealand RS&T".¹
- 2.2 Following a tender process in 2007, MoRST selected the Royal Society of New Zealand (RSNZ) to develop and operate the SMC. The SMC began operation on 1 July 2008. The current contract runs until June 2010.

¹ Ministry of Research, Science and Technology 2007, *Statement of Intent: 2007 - 2010*, Wellington, p.13

2.3 The SMC was established to address specific issues around media coverage of research, science and technology (RS&T):

- media coverage in New Zealand has often portrayed science as a source of fascination rather than integral to New Zealanders' everyday lives
- media coverage of science is constrained because New Zealand is following a trend of having fewer science journalists
- much media coverage focused on overseas rather than New Zealand science, and
- media coverage of science in New Zealand is constrained by the small scale of New Zealand's research organisations and media outlets.

2.4 The request for proposal (RFP) document to establish the SMC stated that the SMC should:

- increase the breadth and depth of New Zealand science and technology in the New Zealand media
- facilitate links between the media and science
- overcome some of the limitations resulting from the small scale of both New Zealand's research organisations and media outlets
- complement not replicate the way science and technology currently appears in the media
- increase the range of media outlets covering RS&T, and
- be driven primarily by the needs of the media in covering science and technology rather than by the perspective of researchers or research organisations.

2.5 The SMC's terms of reference stated that the functions of the Centre would include:

- being a first port of call for media that want science and technology based information
- proactively providing timely information and material on science and technology topics
- developing science and technology (S&T) reporting capability in the New Zealand media
- promoting cultural change within the New Zealand media in support of professional S&T reporting in New Zealand, and
- providing advice and support for people within the science and technology sector on how to engage with the media.

2.6 A copy of the SMC's terms of reference is attached as annex one.

3. Evaluation purpose

- 3.1 The request for proposal document stated that MoRST would evaluate the performance of the successful tenderer.
- 3.2 In early 2009, in consultation with the SMC, MoRST decided that the evaluation would take place after 12 months of operation (July 2009) and that the result of the evaluation would be delivered by the end of 2009.
- 3.3 The evaluation assessed the SMC's first year of operation to determine if the Centre was achieving the goal of improving the breadth and depth of media coverage of New Zealand RS&T.
- 3.4 The evaluation was also intended to highlight areas of current SMC activity that should be continued and to identify areas which should be the focus of future activity.

4. Evaluation design

- 4.1 The evaluation examined three parts of the SMC's operation:
 - attitudes of the media
 - attitudes of the science sector, and
 - the financial operation of the SMC.

ATTITUDES OF THE MEDIA

- 4.2 MoRST contracted Rob Hosking, journalist with *The National Business Review* and *TransTasman* to collect feedback from a sample of people working in the media.
- 4.3 The primary evidence sources used were interviews with 20 media representatives who have had some knowledge or level of contact with the SMC.
- 4.4 The participants were selected to provide a cross section of views from people working in different parts of the media including daily newspapers, Sunday newspapers, wire services, specialist weekly publications, magazines, radio and television. He also spoke to editors, producers and freelance journalists. The sample also included a geographical spread.
- 4.5 The interviews were conducted between September and November 2009. The interviews were semi-structured which allowed participants to freely describe their level of involvement with the SMC and their views on its effectiveness.

4.6 A list of the framework for the discussions with the media is attached as annex two.

4.7 A list of evaluation participants from the media is attached as annex three.

ATTITUDES OF THE SCIENCE SECTOR

4.8 MoRST conducted interviews with 19 people from the science sector including scientists, managers, communications staff and a representative from the private sector who have had some knowledge or level of contact with the SMC.

4.9 The interviews were conducted between September and November 2009. The interviews were semi-structured which allowed participants to freely describe their level of involvement with the SMC and their views on its effectiveness.

4.10 A list of the discussion questions for the science sector is attached as annex four.

4.11 A list of evaluation participants from the science sector is attached as annex five.

FINANCIAL OPERATION OF THE SMC

4.12 MoRST contracted Ross Tanner from Tanner Ritchie & Co, public and primary sector advisers, to undertake a review of the financial operation of the SMC.

4.13 The review was based on relevant documents from the SMC, MoRST and the RSNZ and a series of interviews with representatives from these organisations.

4.14 A copy of the report from Tanner Ritchie & Co is attached as annex six.

5. Summary of findings – media

5.1 The SMC appears to have had considerable impact within the 18 months that it has been established. Awareness amongst the media of what the SMC does is high.

5.2 Consciousness about science-related issues and how they might be reported appears to be much stronger than it was before the establishment of the SMC.

5.3 The SMC is seen as a credible resource.

- 5.4 Journalists have a high level of trust in the SMC because it is not seen as part of a government 'spin machine'.
- 5.5 Trust, however, is fragile and will require careful management if it is to be maintained.
- 5.6 A copy of the media report is attached as annex seven.

6. Summary of findings – science sector

- 6.1 This section provides a summary of the findings from interviews with representatives from the science sector including scientists, managers, communications staff and a representative from the private sector.

LEVEL OF AWARENESS

- 6.2 Most communications staff had been aware of the SMC from the time it began operation. Most researchers were not aware of the Centre until contacted by the SMC and asked to participate in a briefing or provide expert comment on an issue.
- 6.3 Most respondents were very supportive of the SMC's work following their involvement with the Centre.

BREADTH AND DEPTH OF MEDIA COVERAGE

- 6.4 Most respondents noted a variation in the quality of media coverage of RS&T. Some outlets and journalists who specialise in science issues often cover RS&T well, however the quality of other coverage is variable.
- 6.5 Several participants said it was difficult to judge if the SMC had made an impact on the extent of media coverage; they qualified this, however, by saying it was unrealistic to expect significant change after a year, and they may not be aware of any changes as they are not the target audience.
- 6.6 Some respondents mentioned specific media items that contained a deeper level of analysis, and attributed the existence of these items to work undertaken by the SMC.
- 6.7 Several respondents said it was possible media would have covered science stories without the existence of the SMC; they also acknowledged that on the other hand, coverage of science may have declined without the SMC.

- 6.8 Some respondents felt that there had been an increase in media coverage of RS&T. Some participants commented that increased coverage did not necessarily equate to an improvement in capability in the media to do greater analysis.
- 6.9 Some respondents pointed to the agricultural media as providing a model. The agricultural sector is often covered by specialist reporters who have an in-depth knowledge of the business and issues and are therefore able to provide a deeper level of analysis.
- 6.10 Several respondents noted the role the SMC has played in correcting media misreporting.
- 6.11 The SMC has helped make media aware of the range and variety of opinion that exists within the sector.

FACILITATING LINKS BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND SCIENCE

- 6.12 Several communications staff noted the need for the SMC to strengthen linkages with institutions' communications personnel.
- 6.13 This was seen as important because institutions often have specific objectives or perspectives relating to research or topical issues. Strong links with communications staff will enable the SMC to be aware of issues of importance to institutions and thereby communicate the research in a way that maintains SMC's relationships with institutions.
- 6.14 Two ways to strengthen linkages were suggested. Several respondents mentioned the importance of the SMC to advise communications staff if it is having contact with an institution's researchers. Regular meetings or visits were also identified as being valuable in building linkages.
- 6.15 As the SMC staff have backgrounds in journalism they are able to provide a valuable perspective to scientists.
- 6.16 Several respondents felt that the experience of the SMC staff as journalists was a very important factor in its credibility.
- 6.17 The SMC can provide a journalism perspective to science communicators, many of whom do not have backgrounds in the media.
- 6.18 The SMC can provide context for the media, thereby contributing to better coverage and uptake of institutions' stories.

SERVICES

- 6.19 Briefings were most commonly identified as a valuable SMC service. Respondents who had participated in briefings found them to be effective, efficient and well organised events.
- 6.20 There was a lower level of awareness of the SMC's other services.
- 6.21 One respondent said SMC's services provided a useful channel for researchers who have a contractual obligation to communicate their research.

OVERCOMING LIMITATIONS OF SMALL SCALE

- 6.22 Because of its focus the SMC is able to provide a level of specialisation and scale that is difficult for any single organisation to deliver.
- 6.23 The SMC is seen as providing services that individual institutions are not able to do due to resource pressures.

VALUE ADDED AND EASE OF USE

- 6.24 The SMC is seen as filling a gap by providing coordination between institutions, for example by bringing researchers from a variety of organisations together for briefings.
- 6.25 The SMC is also filling a gap by providing the media with context—in the form of background information—around generic issues, for example, briefings on dietary supplements and nanotechnology. The SMC is seen to be adding value by providing the media with this context because, on the whole, individual institutions do not have the incentive or resources to inform the media about areas outside of their specific areas of research.
- 6.26 Numerous respondents commented on the ease of working with the SMC and expressed satisfaction with their involvement with the Centre.
- 6.27 One respondent said the SMC provided value as a sounding board for communication ideas, not all of which relate to SMC activities.
- 6.28 SMC also provided a 'reality check' for academics who might have particular expectations about how the media will cover their research.

FUTURE DIRECTION

- 6.29 Several respondents suggested the need for the SMC to work with journalist training organisations. One suggested focus was to help journalists understand the scientific method.

- 6.30 Respondents noted the need for the SMC to continue to build a constituency for science at a basic level as declining numbers in newsrooms, the loss of specialist rounds and turnover in journalists mean its impact will quickly wear off.
- 6.31 There is a need for the SMC to move up the ‘food chain’—beyond reporters—and engage the gatekeepers who make decisions about what is reported.
- 6.32 A challenge for the SMC will be moving beyond providing copy for the media and towards changing the culture in newsrooms and building capability among journalists to provide a deeper level of analysis. Respondents noted the difficulty of achieving this within the current media environment.
- 6.33 The SMC’s advisory board need to actively set a strategy and contribute to it by advocating for the Centre among the media and the sector.
- 6.34 It is important for the SMC to maintain and boost their profile among researchers and communicators.
- 6.35 In situations where a number of institutions are participating in SMC activities, the Centre needs to bear in mind institutions’ need to promote the achievements of their own particular research.
- 6.36 SMC also needs to be aware that institutions can sometimes be reluctant to share ‘their’ stories, but are also likely to feel excluded if their work is not included in SMC activities.
- 6.37 SMC need to monitor ‘balance’ to ensure they are not favouring any particular institutions.

7. Summary of findings – financial review

- 7.1 All the financial elements that should be in place for an effective organisation have largely been met. There is a need to develop current deliverables into a more robust business plan as experience is gained with the work of the centre.
- 7.2 The SMC is well supported by the RSNZ and there is active engagement from the chief executive of the RSNZ. The SMC and the RSNZ have mutual understanding and agreement on the purpose and direction of the SMC, and the RSNZ is currently providing a supportive environment for the management and operation of the Centre.

- 7.3 The SMC's operational expenditure appears relatively modest and also appropriate for its type of operations.
- 7.4 During the course of the review it became apparent that the RSNZ was including in its allocations to the SMC some costs that were not properly attributable to its operation. Following discussions with the RSNZ, the Society agreed to reduce the portion of the total RSNZ overhead attributed to the SMC. The overhead allocation has been reduced from 7.81 percent down to 6.33 percent. The overhead allocation will now comprise 22.6 percent of the SMC's 2009–10 expenditure, compared with 25.5 percent of its 2008–09 expenditure.
- 7.5 The capital charge allocated by the RSNZ to the SMC appears, prima facie, to be high. However the calculation of the RSNZ's capital charge against its MoRST contracts was accepted by the Ministry in 2006. It may therefore be necessary for MoRST to review this earlier decision.
- 7.6 The SMC, in consultation with the RSNZ and MoRST, is evaluating future funding options for the 2010–11 period. In the light of the fiscal situation facing the New Zealand Government in general, a move towards co-contribution or a form of public-private partnership is sensible.
- 7.7 A copy of the financial review of the SMC is attached as annex three.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

The first year of SMC's operation has focused upon establishing relationships and building trust with media and research organisations. During this time the SMC has established many strong relationships and a solid reputation among media and the science sector.

The consensus of the media and the science sector representatives interviewed is that SMC has been effective in deepening media coverage of science and raising media awareness of scientific issues and the range of scientific expertise within New Zealand. Many respondents reported that they believed the quantity and quality of media coverage had increased since the advent of the SMC. It is, however, difficult to find evidence to support this view.

Generally, the media regard the SMC as credible, independent and cooperative. The SMC staff are seen as professional, informed and responsive to the needs of the media.

From the perspective of the science sector the SMC has added value by providing a level of specialisation and scale that is difficult for any single organisation to deliver. Through its work to provide context for the media the SMC has created a

better environment in which research organisations can communicate their work. Scientists were overwhelmingly positive about their interaction with the SMC.

In regard to financial management, the SMC has in place all the financial elements necessary for an effective organisation. The SMC's operational expenditure appears relatively modest and also appropriate for its type of operations.

The SMC is well supported by the RSNZ and there is active engagement from the chief executive of the RSNZ. The SMC and the RSNZ have mutual understanding and agreement on the purpose and direction of the SMC, and the RSNZ is currently providing a supportive environment for the management and operation of the Centre.

Looking ahead, the challenge for the SMC is to go beyond the achievements of its first year and focus its future work on fostering a broader understanding among the media of the role of science in a modern society and economy. This will require an increase in the capacity of the media to analyse and report science's role effectively. In order to achieve this objective the SMC will need to have a clear strategic focus.

Therefore we recommend that:

Recommendation 1: The SMC, in consultation with the RSNZ, the advisory board and MoRST, develop a strategic and business plan to focus future activity on areas that will have the greatest impact on improving the breadth and depth of media coverage of New Zealand RS&T.

Given the central role played by research organisations, a key factor in the SMC's ongoing success will be strong relationships with these organisations, in particular communications managers. Therefore we recommend that:

Recommendation 2: The SMC pay particular attention to strengthening links with research organisations.

The ability of the SMC to achieve its goals is, to a large degree, dependent upon its financial health. The SMC is currently fully funded by MoRST, however in light of the fiscal situation facing the Government, it is sensible for the SMC to continue to explore alternative funding options. Therefore we recommend that:

Recommendation 3: The SMC and the RSNZ continue to actively explore options for future funding including a move towards co-contribution or a form of public-private partnership.

These three recommendations are designed to address the key issues raised in this evaluation, and allow the SMC to achieve its main objective of improving the breadth and depth of media coverage of New Zealand RS&T.

Annex one

New Zealand Science Media Centre Terms of reference

1. Preamble

- Strong and transparent links between the media and science and technology sectors are important in a modern society.
- Science and technology (S&T) cover a vast territory, from mathematics engineering and business through to health, social sciences and the environment. Across these areas S&T play a key role in driving advances that significantly impact on the way we live our lives.
- It is important therefore that society is aware of the role that S&T can offer on a range of topics. It is also important for society to consider and debate potential challenges that may emerge around new and emerging areas of S&T.

2. Role

- The Science and Technology Media Centre (STMC) will facilitate links between the media and science so that the media has easy access to relevant scientific information. The Centre will support existing media as well as new and emerging media channels.
- The STMC will facilitate these links by ascertaining the needs of the media and structuring its operations to meet these needs.

3. Functions

The functions of the STMC will include:

- Being a first port of call for media that want science and technology based information
- Proactively providing timely information and material on science and technology topics
- Developing S&T reporting capability in the New Zealand media
- Promoting cultural change within the New Zealand media in support of professional S&T reporting in New Zealand
- Providing advice and support for people within the science and technology sector on how to engage with the media

4. Scope

- The focus of the centre is the media – particularly sectors of the media and their staff that don't have specialised S&T capability.
- The STMC will primarily deal with New Zealand RS&T but international RS&T can be included where there is a strong connection with or relevance to New Zealand.
- The STMC's focus on the media will primarily be on the working media. Training and capacity building for journalists will be a secondary priority.
- The STMC will not provide a service for the public, or for the education community, although some resources could be accessed and used by them.

5. Operating principles

- The STMC needs to add unique value over and above the activity already occurring within the RS&T sector. It may co-ordinate, facilitate, enhance and/or complement but not duplicate the communications undertaken by others.
- Where the STMC is addressing issues that reasonably appear to lie within the realm of another institution or institutions, the STMC should focus on cross-sector issues rather than on topics the individual research organisations can, or should be, promoting themselves.
- The STMC will not take any particular standpoint or position on RS&T issues.
- The STMC will not lobby for the government or science and technology sector.
- The STMC will not take any particular standpoint or position on matters related to RS&T funding policy and management.
- The STMC will be open and transparent about its funding sources.

- The STMC will operate to the highest ethical standards.
- The STMC will operate in a way that is responsive and transparent.

6. Independence

- The STMC will operate as a stand alone unit within the Royal Society of New Zealand.
- The Manager of the STMC will report to the Chief Executive of the Royal Society of New Zealand and will be independent from the other operations of the Royal Society of New Zealand.
- In its work the STMC will be editorially independent from: the Ministry of Research, Science and Technology and any other government agency; the Royal Society of New Zealand; and from any organisation that funds, provides content to or in any way supports the STMC.
- Reflecting the taxpayers' investment in the STMC, the Royal Society will be accountable to the Ministry for the efficient operation of the Centre.
- The STMC will ensure it does not appear to favour any particular medium, media outlet/s or institution/s.

7. Advisory board

The role of the advisory board will be to:

- Provide advice to the chief executive of RSNZ on the activities and scope of the STMC within the terms of reference
- Act as independent strategic advisors for the STMC and advocates for the professional reporting of science, and
- Provide a level of risk mitigation through their status as independent advisors.

The Advisory Board will operate under its own terms of reference which will be decided by the President of the Royal Society of New Zealand. The Advisory Board will comprise at least five members and include representatives from the media, science and technology and business sectors.

May 2008

Annex two

FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSIONS – MEDIA

AREA OF INTEREST	DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
Level of awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To what extent are you aware of the SMC?• Have you been involved with the SMC and, if so, how?
Breadth and depth of media coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you think the SMC has had an impact on the breadth and depth of media coverage of RS&T in New Zealand?• If yes, can you give any examples where the SMC has contributed to an improvement in the breadth and depth of media coverage of RS&T in New Zealand?• If no, why not?• Do you think the SMC has had an impact on the range of media outlets covering RS&T? Can you give any examples?• Thinking about the future – what could the SMC do to improve the breadth and depth of media coverage?
Facilitating links between media and science	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How effective has the SMC been in providing you with easy access to the media?• What could it do differently to help build links?
Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What services are you aware of?• What services would you find useful?
Overcoming limitations of small scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can you think of any examples of how the SMC has attempted to overcome the limitations of small scale?• Have these initiatives been successful?
Value added and ease of use	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How easy is the SMC to engage with?• Can you give any examples of how they have added value to your work?• How attuned is the SMC to your needs?• Are you satisfied with the service and support provided by the SMC?
Future direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is the SMC doing well? What should they continue doing?

Annex three

EVALUATION PARTICIPANTS – MEDIA

NAME	TITLE	ORGANISATION
Ray Lilley	Reporter	Associated Press
Adelia Hallett	Editor	Carbon News
Marilyn Head	Science/health/astronomy writer	Freelance
Philippa Stevenson	Agricultural/science writer	Freelance
Hugh Stringleman	Rural reporter	freelance
Chris Barton	Feature writer	New Zealand Herald
Eloise Gibson	Environment reporter	New Zealand Herald
Sarah Barnett	Feature writer	New Zealand Listener
Rebecca Macfie	Writer	New Zealand Listener
Kent Atkinson	Reporter	New Zealand Press Association
Joanna Wane	Senior writer	North & South
John Gibb	Science reporter	Otago Daily Times
Paul Gorman	Senior reporter	The Press
Graeme Hill	Weekend host	RadioLive
Karen Brown	Health reporter	Radio New Zealand
Duncan Wilson	Senior producer	Radio New Zealand
Adam Dudding	News editor	Sunday Star Times
Eugene Bingham	Producer – 60 Minutes	TV3
Kim Hurring	Producer/reporter – Campbell Live	TV3
Lorelei Mason	Health/general reporter – One News	TVNZ

Annex four

FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSIONS – SCIENCE SECTOR

AREA OF INTEREST	DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
Level of awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To what extent are you aware of the SMC?• Have you been involved with the SMC and, if so, how?
Breadth and depth of media coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you think the SMC has had an impact on the breadth and depth of media coverage of RS&T in New Zealand?• If yes, can you give any examples where the SMC has contributed to an improvement in the breadth and depth of media coverage of RS&T in New Zealand?• If no, why not?• Do you think the SMC has had an impact on the range of media outlets covering RS&T? Can you give any examples?• Thinking about the future – what could the SMC do to improve the breadth and depth of media coverage?
Facilitating links between media and science	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How effective has the SMC been in providing you with easy access to the media?• What could it do differently to help build links?
Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What services are you aware of?• What services would you find useful?
Overcoming limitations of small scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can you think of any examples of how the SMC has attempted to overcome the limitations of small scale?• Have these initiatives been successful?
Value added and ease of use	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How easy is the SMC to engage with?• Can you give any examples of how they have added value to your work?• How attuned is the SMC to your needs as a researcher/communicator and the environment in which you operate?• Are you satisfied with the service and support provided by the SMC?• Have they supported your work or have they ‘crowded out’ your organisation’s communications activities?
Future direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is the SMC doing well? What should they continue doing?

Annex five

EVALUATION PARTICIPANTS - SCIENCE SECTOR

NAME	TITLE	ORGANISATION
Allanah James	Communications manager	AgResearch
John McEwan	Senior scientist	AgResearch
Alison Corich	Communications manager	ESR
John Callan	Communications manager	GNS
Andrew Trevelyan	Communications and marketing manager	Landcare
Bob Elliott	Medical director	Living Cell Technologies
Geoff Baird	Communications manager	NIWA
John Morgan	Chief executive	NIWA
Roger Bourne	Corporate Communications Manager	Plant & Food Research
Brent Clothier	Group leader, Systems modelling	Plant & Food Research
Emma Timewell	Senior communications advisor	Plant & Food Research
Professor Sir Peter Gluckman	Prime Minister's Chief Science Adviser	Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Adviser
Professor Ian Shaw	Professor of toxicology	University of Canterbury
Lindsey Birnie	Communications manager	Massey University
Professor Jacqueline Rowarth	Director Massey Agriculture	Massey University
Simon Ancell	Communications advisor	University of Otago
Professor Lloyd Davis	Director, Centre for Science Communication	University of Otago
Professor Tim Naish	Director, Antarctic Research Centre	Victoria University
Madeleine Setchell	Communications manager	Victoria University

Annex six – financial review of the SMC



16 October, 2009

John Baillie,
General Manager, Organisational Development and Support
Ministry of Research, Science and Technology,
P.O. Box 5336,
Wellington

Dear John,

'Value for money' review of the Science Media Centre, October 2009

You have asked me to undertake a review of the financial operation of the Science Media Centre (SMC), a stand alone unit within the Royal Society of NZ that is funded out of the Ministry's 'Engaging New Zealanders with Science and Technology' output class. The following is my report on the examination that I have undertaken.

Background

In its 2007-2010 Statement of Intent, as part of a strategy to lift the capability of New Zealanders to engage in debate around ideas initiated by science and technology, the Ministry of Research, Science and Technology (MoRST) proposed the establishment of a Science and Technology media centre (SMC) for New Zealand. Following a tender process in 2007, MoRST selected the Royal Society of New Zealand to develop a proposal for a SMC. MoRST accepted their proposal and entered into a service agreement with the RSNZ for the operation of the SMC. The New Zealand Science Media Centre was launched on 30 June 2008 and opened for business on 1 July 2008. The initial funding agreement is for a pilot phase of three years, of which just over one year has now been completed.

The main high level outcome for the SMC is to "improve the breadth and depth of media coverage of New Zealand RS&T" (MoRST SOI, 2007-2010).

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Scope of this review

My review is part of an evaluation of the SMC's first year of operation. A separate but concurrent evaluation is being undertaken of the products and services provided by the SMC during the year, based on interviews with representatives from the media and the science sector. This review of the Centre's financial operations has been conducted independently of that latter perspective.

The purpose of my engagement has been to provide you with an independent external perspective on the cost structure of the SMC, based on the first full year of operations, with a particular focus on overheads and the capital charge. You have asked that I provide to you an assurance that the approach being taken is robust, and to raise any issues that need attention. I have sought to assess whether there is a rigorous focus on costs, balanced against the need for prudent management and sustainability of the Centre in future years.

I have undertaken the following activities:

- Read the following background documents:
 - the Ministry's 2008-11 SOI (page 8).
 - the SMC's six monthly financial reports to 31 December 2008 and to 30 June 2009.
 - the Services Agreement between MoRST and RSNZ for operating the SMC, dated 2 May 2008.
 - the initial proposal for establishment of the SMC from RSNZ dated February 2008.
 - a note for the SMC Advisory Board on future funding options dated February 2009.
- Interviewed Bruce Jones, CFO of the RSNZ.
- Met with Rick Marshall and yourself.
- Met with Peter Griffin, Manager of the SMC.
- Undertaken further research and sought advice by telephone from both the RSNZ and the SMC.

I was provided with copies of the Centre's 2009-10 budget and, upon request, with breakdowns of the Society's capital charge and overhead calculations.

'Value for money'

The Auditor-General defines "value for money" in recent guidance about the funding by public entities of non-Government organisations, in the following way: "Public entities should use resources effectively, economically and without waste in achieving their policies and end-user benefits". A further relevant comment made by the OAG is that "at the planning stage, the public entity should be able to justify how it intends to spend the public funds. Further on in the life cycle of the funding relationship it should be able

to demonstrate that the policy is having the desired effects and that the money is not going to waste”¹.

The Auditor-General comments that while it may be easier to justify the funding where outcomes, and the contribution of funded services to these outcomes, are tangible, the principle that public resources should be applied for the best possible public benefit still applies even where the desired outcome is less tangible.

My expectations of the review

In undertaking this review, I formed a set of expectations against which I would make an assessment and report findings. I looked for the following attributes:

1. A documented business plan: can the SMC justify how it intends to spend the public funds?
2. An approved budget, and regular financial reporting;
3. Clear understanding by staff both of the Centre and of the RSNZ about the purpose and direction of the SMC;
4. Evidence of prudent management of the costs of the SMC;
5. Efforts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the SMC during this ‘pilot’ phase of its operations;
6. Support/ engagement from the chief executive of the Royal Society;
7. Active engagement by the Centre and RSNZ in dialogue about future funding options.

As noted above from the Auditor-General’s guidance, further on in the life cycle of the funding relationship the SMC should be able to demonstrate that the funding it receives from the Government is having the desired effects and that the money is not going to waste.

Financial results

The financial results for the year ended 30 June 2009 are shown in the table enclosed with this letter. The table is taken from the second six month report of the SMC.

The financial results for the year show a surplus of \$49,386. This is better than the budget for the year because during the year some unspent moneys in a Science Promotion Fund held by MoRST totalling \$95,000 were transferred to the Royal Society for use by the SMC. Since this funding was transferred mid-way through the year, it was in effect difficult for the funding to be spent last year. An amount of \$49,386 was transferred to reserves (as shown in the financial report), and the balance held as income - in - advance so that website developments could be completed in 2009-10.

Findings

My expectations of the elements that should be in place for an effective organisation have largely been met.

¹ Office of the Auditor General: “Principles to underpin management by public entities of funding to non-Government organisations”, June, 2006.

1. Business plan

I had expected to see a clear and documented business plan with deliverables and key milestones, and with roles and responsibilities defined. The SMC prepared a 'Strategic Plan year 1 and 2' in April 2008, which I have seen. Although the title describes it as a two year plan, it actually reflects project deliverables and milestones to June 30, 2009 only. The initial proposal from the RSNZ for establishment of the SMC prepared in February 2008 incorporated a plan covering the period to June 30, 2010. Updated goals for 2009-10 are set out in the Second Six Monthly report to MoRST (pages 8 - 10). A revised budget has also been prepared for the current year to June 30, 2010.

There are four priority areas of activity and milestones in the initial strategic plan, which seem to me to have been appropriate for a first year of operation. There is clearly a need to develop these into a more robust plan as experience is gained with the work of the centre. At present, the deliverables are a mixture of aspiration and concrete activity. The Centre is in the process of creating a new strategic plan and business plan for years 3 & 4. The business development manager at the RSNZ is working with them to develop a business plan and the SMC Advisory Board is working on the strategic plan.

I am assuming that the actual deliverables of the centre will be examined in a course of the companion evaluation of its products and services.

2. Budget and financial reporting

A budget for the SMC has been established and approved by the Royal Society. The current budget for 2009-10 provides for a small profit of \$7,000. [See note above about the surplus transferred forward from 2008-09.]

The SMC receives monthly financial statements from the RSNZ and in turn provides quarterly reports to the RSNZ and six monthly reports to the Ministry.

3. Understanding of business purpose and direction

I was satisfied as a result of my conversations with both the SMC and the RSNZ, that there is mutual understanding and agreement on the purpose and direction of the SMC, and a supportive environment for the management and operation of the Centre.

4. Income and expenditure

I reviewed the financial statements carefully and talked to the CFO of the RSNZ, to seek assurance of prudent management of the costs of the SMC. I have also reviewed the budget for 2009-10.

Income

The SMC is fully funded by the grant from MoRST of \$578,000. In addition, as noted a further \$95,000 was transferred to the Royal Society for use by the SMC, during the year from a Science Promotion Fund. This core grant will remain the same for 2009-10.

Salaries and wages

SMC staff comprises the manager and two others, being 2.7 FTEs. Salary levels appear to be appropriate for this type of role. Payments for contractors and other people related requirements are modest and well below budget. There will be three FTE staff for the 2009-10 year.

Travel

Travel costs are above budget but this reflects a decision to allow the manager to attend two overseas science conferences during the year as well as domestic travel relevant to the role. The total expenditure on travel appears modest and also appropriate.

IT costs

Given the need to develop a website and procure software for its audio and video activity, IT costs have exceeded the initial budget. However total costs appear appropriate for an organisation in its start-up phase. It should be noted that the IT expenditure does not reflect the cost of IT hardware (laptops etc) as these have been provided to the SMC by the RSNZ.

Sponsorship, marketing and events

The overall expenditure in 2008-09 in these three areas appears modest and in the event was not fully spent during the year.

Office rental and premises costs

I have no basis to query the expenditure in these items, except to note that the operational expenditure on premises exceeded budget in 2008-09. The Centre moved during the year from space within the Royal Society's offices in Thorndon to separate accommodation in the Wellington C.B.D. as a result of its wish to be seen as operationally independent from the Society.

Capital charge

A decision was taken by the RSNZ in 2006 to apply a capital charge to the Society's capital base. Approximately 75% of the Society's income is provided from contracts for services to MoRST, and the Ministry has apparently agreed to a capital charge being incorporated as part of the payment to the Society for services provided. The rate of charge to be applied was based on a recommendation from PricewaterhouseCoopers, who indicated that the rate to be applied should reflect the risk profile of its major funder, being the Ministry. The capital charge (cost of equity) applied to MoRST is 7.5%. The advice from PwC² indicates however that the Ministry accepted that the Society faced greater difficulties accessing capital than the Crown and that a premium on the MoRST cost of equity would be appropriate.

The capital charge rate for the RSNZ in the current year budget has been arrived at as follows (\$000):

Total Budgeted RSNZ Capital Employed	14,356
Less:	
Designated Purpose Funds	5,307
Investment Properties	4,320
Adjusted Assets Employed	4,729

² Letter to the CE of the Society dated 10 July 2006 from PricewaterhouseCoopers

Capital charge (10.5% at 33% tax) 15.67%	741
MoRST proportion 75%	556

This capital charge was then apportioned across the various MoRST contract areas based on their relative revenue proportions. The detail is shown in an attachment to this letter.

Office rental was excluded from those cost centres housed in the RSNZ's own office premises (and therefore not from the SMC, which is located separately). The capital charge applicable to the Science Media Centre was \$64,227 or 13.6% of the net capital charge attributable across the MORST income categories, and 11.2% of the SMC budget.

Prima facie, this cost appears high. The answer however is in MoRST's purview, as the decision to allow a premium in calculating the capital charge over and above the MoRST cost of equity was accepted by the Ministry in 2006. It may therefore be useful for the Ministry to review this earlier decision.

RSNZ overheads

RSNZ overheads allocated to the SMC in 2008-09 amounted to \$146,011, or 25.5 percent of expenditure. During the course of my review I sought detail on what this overhead comprises.

The overhead cost for 2008-09 was \$1,480,000 and consists of

- Corporate administration (incl. financial management) \$ 1,108,000
- General marketing \$ 197,000
- Council costs \$ 105,000
- CEO cost centre \$ 68,000

During the course of my discussion with the CFO of the Society and also with you and your staff, it became apparent that the Society was also including in its administration allocations to the SMC, some costs that were not properly attributable to its operation. The SMC is for example paying for its own website maintenance and design and other software costs. Its accommodation is also a direct cost to its budget, and it should not be seen to pay for any accommodation rental included in the administrative overhead. It also undertakes its own marketing and endeavours to be seen as independent of the Royal Society, so marketing costs for the Society as a whole should probably not be attributed to it. There were in addition some publishing costs relating to other cost centres within the society that should not be attributed in any way to the SMC.

The CFO has therefore adjusted the overhead allocation for these factors and has reduced it by \$378,000 for the coming year, as shown in the following table. The proportion of the total overhead attributed to the SMC is therefore now 6.3%, and will comprise 22.6% of its 2009-10 expenditure.

Overhead cost centres \$000	Total Budget (1)	SMC Adjustment	Adjusted overhead (2)
Marketing	121	-	121
Corporate	1,634	-	211
CEO	78		78

Council	73		73	
I T	131	-	46	85
Total	2,037	-	378	1,659
SMC %	7.81%		7.78% (2)	6.33% (1)
SMC Overhead	159		129	

Taken together, the proportion of the SMC budget attributable to the Royal Society's overhead costs and the capital charge accounted for 33.8 percent of the SMC's expenditure in 2008-09.

It is difficult to benchmark this cost against other organisations in New Zealand because of the unique nature of the SMC operations. It is worth noting however that the counterpart organisation in Australia, The Australian Science Media Centre (AusSMC) is a national, independent, not-for-profit organisation. While its budget is roughly equivalent to that of the NZ SMC in NZ dollar terms, it does not carry either an overhead cost or capital charge, and is therefore able to retain more staff. It does not however attract the same degree of government support as is the case in NZ and depends on a range of corporate, media and university sponsors as well as state and federal government agencies.

The SMC in the UK is housed within the Royal Institution but independent from any single scientific body. To preserve its independence, funding has been sought from a wide variety of sources, none of which have contributed more than 5% of the total running costs (£400,000 per year). I could not locate any financial information however either on its own website or from that of its host, the Royal Institution.

A consequence of the decision to seek a host institution for the new Science Media Centre in 2007 rather than for it to be a stand-alone institution is that the new Centre would need to 'pay its way' i.e. to contribute towards the overhead costs and cost of capital employed by the host institution. The same would be the case were it be to have been hosted by another organization, including government departments, although it is possible that the overheads in a larger organisations would be spread across a larger income base and therefore be proportionately lower. As a rule of thumb, it could be expected that operational costs in an organisation would approximate 1.5 times the wage and salary cost. Excluding the capital charge from the total, the operational cost of the SMC is 2.3 times salaries, wage and contractor costs. The largest proportion of this cost is, as noted, the corporate overhead.

I have not scrutinized every aspect of corporate overheads for the Society—my task was not to review the management of the Society. The conclusion that I have drawn in this respect however is that the Ministry will need in future to be careful about the attribution of corporate overheads of RSNZ to the various programmes funded by the Ministry, including the SMC, to ensure that there is no 'double attribution' of charges.

5. Improving efficiency and effectiveness of the SMC

I anticipated that efforts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the SMC would be commenced during this 'pilot' phase of its operations, although it is perhaps a little early for these to have developed far after only one year of activity. Such improvements will depend on the Centre having a clear strategy and business plan in place, against which performance can be defined and assessed. As noted above the SMC is in the process of creating a strategic plan and business plan for years 3 & 4 of its operation. An assessment of the efficiency of its operation should therefore be possible after that

point. An initial external assessment of effectiveness is being undertaken in the separate concurrent evaluation with this report.

6. Support/ engagement from the chief executive of the Royal Society

I was assured by both the Manager of the SMC and from the perspective of the RSNZ that there is active support from the chief executive of the Society. Chief executive engagement is viewed positively by the manager and staff of the Centre.

7. Active engagement by the Centre and RSNZ in dialogue about future funding options.

The second six monthly report for the SMC notes that following consultation with the Royal Society and MoRST the Centre is evaluating funding options for the SMC for the 2010-2011 period. This issue will be the focus of Advisory Board meetings in the current year. I consider this a useful step, and note that the initial proposal for establishment of the Centre prepared by the RSNZ in February 2008 stated (page 21) that ' the initial three year period was generally seen as a chance to establish a reputation, before moving to a longer-term funding model with capped contributions similar to the UK and Australian SMCs'. In the light of the fiscal situation facing the NZ Government in general, a move towards co-contribution or a form of public-private partnerships is sensible.

Conclusions

I have found that the elements that should be in place for an effective organisation have largely been met. The work programme of the SMC is supported by a strategic plan initially prepared in February 2008 covering the period to June 30, 2010. Updated goals for 2009-10 are set out in the Second Six Monthly report to MoRST (pages 8 - 10). A revised budget has also been prepared for the current year to June 30, 2010. There are four priority areas of activity and milestones in the initial strategic plan, which seem to me to have been appropriate for a first year of operation. At present, the deliverables are a mixture of aspiration and concrete activity. There is clearly a need to develop these into a more robust business plan as experience is gained with the work of the centre. The Centre is in the process of creating a new strategic plan and business plan for years 3 & 4.

The SMC and the RSNZ have mutual understanding and agreement on the purpose and direction of the SMC, and the RSNZ is currently providing a supportive environment for the management and operation of the Centre.

Financial results for the first year of operation show a surplus of \$49,386. This is better than the budget for the year because during the year some unspent moneys in a Science Promotion Fund held by MoRST totalling \$95,000 were transferred to the Royal Society for use by the SMC. A budget for the SMC has been established and approved by the Royal Society. The budget for 2009-10 provides for a small profit of \$7,000. Financial reporting systems are robust and appropriate.

Operational expenditure for the SMC appears relatively modest and also appropriate for its type of operations. Some of that expenditure (office rent and IT costs) result from the decision for the Centre to be accommodated separately from the Royal Society's own offices as a result of its wish to be seen as operationally independent from the Society.

During the course of my discussion with the CFO of the Society and also with you and your staff, it became apparent that the Society was also including in its administration allocations to the SMC, some costs that were not properly attributable to its operation. The CFO has therefore adjusted the overhead allocation for these factors and has

reduced it by \$378,000 for the coming year. The proportion of the total RSNZ overhead attributed to the SMC is therefore now 6.3%, and will comprise 22.6% of its 2009-10 expenditure.

I have not scrutinized every aspect of corporate overheads for the Society—my task was not to review the management of the Society. The Ministry will need in future to be careful about the attribution of corporate overheads of RSNZ to the SMC, to ensure that there is no 'double attribution' of charges.

You asked me also to review the attribution of a capital charge to the funding received from MoRST for the SMC. Taken together the capital charge and overhead costs from the RSNZ accounted for 33.8% of the SMC's expenditure budget in 2009-10.

I have set out the capital charge calculations earlier in this letter and in an attachment. The overall capital charge against MoRST-funded activities has been then apportioned across the various contract areas based on their relative revenue proportions. The capital charge applicable to the Science Media Centre was \$64,227 or 13.6% of the net capital charge attributable across the MORST income categories, and 11.2% of the SMC budget.

Prima facie, this cost appears high. The answer however is in MoRST's purview, as the decision to allow a premium in calculating the capital charge over and above the MoRST cost of equity was accepted by the Ministry in 2006. It may therefore be useful for the Ministry to review this earlier decision.

Overall, I found that the SMC is well supported by the RSNZ and there is active engagement from the chief executive of the Society. Together with the Royal Society and MoRST, the Centre is evaluating funding options for the SMC for the 2010-2011 period. In the light of the fiscal situation facing the NZ Government in general, a move towards co-contribution or a form of public-private partnerships would be sensible.

Thank you for the opportunity to undertake this assignment for you. I hope that my contribution has been helpful.

Yours sincerely

Ross Tanner
Principal

Annex seven

Report on media attitudes to the Science Media Centre

Rob Hosking, November 2009

SUMMARY

The original proposal for the Science Media Centre, in February 2008, noted the problem reported by media people of: “A lack of awareness of potential science and technology stories, having no time to search for the right material, and simply ‘not being in the S&T loop’ as being the most commonly reported barriers” to coverage of science-related stories.

Measured against this, the SMC appears to have had a considerable impact. Awareness of what the centre itself does is high: a consciousness about science-related issues and how they might be reported also appears much stronger than it was at the time the proposal for the SMC was put together.

The SMC is seen partly as a conduit and partly as a resource for journalists. Above all, it is seen as a credible resource.

The level of trust journalists have in the SMC is particularly high because it is not seen as part of a government “spin machine”. This though is a potentially fragile beast and will require careful management if it is to be maintained.

1. Process

Interviews with 20 journalists across a range of New Zealand media were carried out over September–October 2009. The interviews were with a mix of print, radio, television and web journalists, and included general mainstream journalists as well as specialists in science, environment, health, and agriculture.

2. Awareness

Levels of awareness are high. Respondents were asked to name what services the SMC delivers: all named the web site, the regular email bulletins, and the updates which the centre delivers when some new science-related story emerges.

Awareness of the conferences is also high although usage is somewhat lower. A few journalists have embraced the ‘podcasts’ while others are still a little reticent about using them. There is partly a generational effect at work here: the younger respondents mentioned them favourably, the older ones less so, apart from one who is a former editor of PC World.

The very recently announced Sciblogs has a notably high degree of awareness, given its newness. It is being watched closely.

3. Usage

All respondents referred to using the regular email updates. In most cases this was direct usage – i.e. they were either used as starting points for stories or were used as reference material for stories which were already being put together.

“Generally its pretty good, the email comes through and you run down the list and see what’s going on. They’re really up with the play.¹”

Some however used them fairly minimally – the Sunday newspapers and television being the main ones. In these cases though it is perhaps an issue of the centre’s information having an impact when it is used.

One respondent cited a case where the team for a weekly current affairs programme was in the process of putting together a story about water quality.

“We were in the middle of a story about the state of the rivers, etc, and the SMC had a briefing on exactly that topic. It was a great way of checking out we were on the right track with what we had been talking to people about.²”

Similarly, several respondents cited using the emails, and the links contained within them, as a reference point for stories put together later on.

At a more mundane but functional level, the centre is seen as being a very useful point of contact for getting in touch with scientists in specialist fields. Several respondents noted they did not use the site’s publications very much but use media centre personnel as conduits to contact scientists.

This is widely regarded as an improvement. Several respondents commented on problems with the Crown research institutes in finding knowledgeable people to talk to.

4. Trust and reliability

This appears high, and it could very easily not have been. Many of the journalists spoken to have mixed feelings, not about the SMC itself, but about their need to use it. A common comment is that they feel they should be able to do a lot of the research and direct contact with scientists themselves, but resources and time means they are unable to.

Most journalists have more than one ‘round’, even in highly specialised areas. This has become more so as newsrooms have become more depleted.

At the same time journalists are also highly wary of anything smacking of “spin”. A very frequent comment is that the SMC has managed to avoid pushing any particular “line” (although not all see this as a totally positive thing: see Possible future developments below.)

¹ Newspaper journalist

² Producer, television

The fact the SMC has “employed people who ‘get’ journalism” (in the words of one respondent) is a common theme of almost all interviews.

A number noted the greater use by smaller newspapers of stories generated by the SMC and this is seen as mostly a positive thing, although again there are mixed feelings about this and how far it should go.

Again, there is a generational issue here: older journalists are more likely to be wary of this aspect of the centre’s work whereas younger ones did not mention it as an issue.

“I think they’re getting a few stories placed in regional newspapers...I guess I’m an old fashioned print person and I think journalists should be writing the stories...I don’t think I could ever be entirely happy about that. But that versus nothing? Maybe it’s not so bad, as long as it’s an agency run by people with and understanding and with a keen sense of public interest...³”

One respondent who does not use the SMC as often as he would like noted his paper “tends to use them for rolling stories, like Swine Flu and pseudoephedrine. We can use them and be confident that what they’re telling us is right.”⁴

One responded described the centre as being “like a credible Wikipedia,⁵”, while another noted that the SMC is being increasingly used as a ‘cheat sheet’ for journalists who are not specialists.⁶”

5. Impact

A. TANGIBLE

All spoken to thus far believe the SMC’s work has had a wider, positive impact on coverage of science issues, although the concession is this is from a very low base. Most simply referred to a “gut feeling” coverage has improved but a number cite specific examples.

Coverage of swine flu is the most prominent. A number of respondents commented on how, once the initial “shock horror” stories had hit, there were other follow ups using material garnered through the SMC which produced some more informed coverage.

“You could, if you had seen the briefings, see where the [SMC] resources had gone when you saw the coverage...it led to pretty cohesive coverage in the daily papers...I’m not sure the SMC has led to more coverage [by volume] but it has led to more in-depth coverage.”⁷”

Two respondents cited instances where the SMC had “held the media to account” by producing real research which rubbished some stories using suspect science.

³ Journalist, weekly magazine

⁴ Editor, newspaper

⁵ Producer, radio

⁶ Journalist, newspaper

⁷ Journalist, magazine

“Where stories have used suspect science they have been quite good.... one story had kids running around after eating sweets with food colouring. It was highly scientifically flawed and the centre had information debunking that. On things like that I think they’ve raised the standard.⁸”

A common comment however is there has been improvement in print and (to a lesser degree, because the standard was already perceived to be higher) radio; but minimal improvement in television coverage of science issues.

This issue was acknowledged, if tacitly, by the television people spoken to: one respondent noted television’s needs are for “shallow” stories with a “populist” edge, but also pointed to coverage of events such as the tsunami which had used SMC-generated information.

Another cited a general approach which appeared to be “de-Frankensteining⁹” the image of scientists among journalists.

B. INTANGIBLE

Several respondents referred to instances either in their own work, or in their colleague’s work, where the SMC had prevented someone doing a story, which would have been factually wrong. This also underlines the issue of the SMC’s credibility: it is increasingly seen as a reference point.

It also highlights the underlying issue of poor knowledge of science issues is still very prevalent in newsrooms.

Others suggested that simply by having SMC, and its reasonably (within the media) high profile has had a positive impact.

“What I see is it has just made people more aware of science reporting, as an issue, and as a good thing in itself.¹⁰”

One other respondent also noted the SMC, in its day to day contacts with media, is having a slow impact on knowledge about science issues, and “there is a bit of gentle education going on through that centre: there’s a potential to do a bit more, I think.¹¹”

Another respondent, from television, noted that although she could seldom use the material directly, she referred to it every day and it “adds context...and quite a bit of depth¹²” for her work.

6. Possible future developments

Respondents were asked what improvements could be made. Responses were fairly wide-ranging but broadly fell within several categories.

⁸ Journalist, magazine

⁹ Talkback host

¹⁰ Editor

¹¹ Reporter, newspaper

¹² Reporter, television

A. EDUCATION AND RELATED QUESTIONS

Several respondents talked of the tendency of journalists to be from an “arts” background (indeed, it is the arts background journalists who were more inclined to mention it than the few with a science or technology background).

The extent to which this is simply reflective of a wider lack of knowledge of science issues among the wider population is beyond the scope of this survey. However the responses of almost all those surveyed reflected an awareness that they are in a position to improve a wider knowledge of scientific questions among the wider population – but that they need help to do this.

“I don’t think this is just about the media... it’s an all round problem. There are so many really big issues facing us of a scientific nature and the voices of the pole who know about this stuff are not being heard.¹³”

A number suggested doing more work to counter this at the journalism training level, partly about covering science-related issues but also on basic matters such as scientific method.

A few also suggested sponsoring prizes for science-related stories. There was also applause for the sponsoring of a journalist to go to Copenhagen to cover the Climate Change Summit but a general sentiment the amount involved – \$1500 – was only of use to someone who was already going.

One other respondent – referring specifically to the credibility the SMC is developing, suggesting this could be used to “exert more pressure” for science-related stories.

B. CONTROVERSIAL MATTERS

Several respondents suggested the SMC tends to shy away from more controversial areas, and also to “gloss over” areas where there is scientific dispute. “Science does not always speak with a unified voice¹⁴,” is how one respondent put it. Others cited the climate change debate as one area this could occur.

Others suggested a more vigorous “debunking” role on issues such as “pseudo science” and on public controversies such as 1080 poisoning.

The advent of the Science Blogs was mentioned by a couple of respondents as one channel which might be used for this approach.

Others were more wary of the SMC itself becoming more controversial: “that’s our job as journalists, really – there has to be a line somewhere¹⁵” was how one respondent put it.

¹³ Radio science reporter

¹⁴ Journalist, newspaper.

¹⁵ Producer, Television

C. POPULISM

Ideas included perhaps providing a regular syndicated column on science-related issues to newspapers, along the lines of the Dominion Post's doctor column by local GP Chris Kalderimis. The GP's column usually takes a topical issue – often a celebrity with a recently publicised disease – and expands upon it. A couple of Wellington – based journalists suggested a similar model could be adopted for science, but using different scientists as the topic demanded.

Television was more interested in the populist approach:

“They could possibly find more populist subjects, what works for daily newspapers won't necessarily work for television, where we're looking for experiential issues for human beings.¹⁶”

Several print journalists cited better coverage of science issues on television as being crucial to a wider understanding of science issues but also noted the populist nature of the medium makes it a difficult nut to crack.

“There is no shortage of excellent material: it's the outlets that are the problem, television in particular...that is where the effort needs to go.¹⁷”

Two respondents recalled (British) science programmes aimed at children from the 1970s and suggested something similar for New Zealand. Another respondent suggested broadening the definition of science to include “soft” sciences such as sociology and psychology.

D. “PITCHING” AND “PLAYING FAVOURITES”

The practice of providing new information to all journalists at the same time, and not giving anyone a release in advance, was much commented on. Several suggested the SMC could get better coverage if it were more prepared to “play favourites” although the presumption behind such suggestions seemed to be that the journalist concerned would themselves be a “favourite”.

Sunday newspapers and television were particularly strong on this issue, but other journalists – primarily from the larger newspapers – also mentioned it.

The closest analogy – and it is a far from perfect one – is with Statistics New Zealand, which has regular, embargoed, releases of information to everyone. However, Statistics New Zealand will also provide specific information to individual journalists if they ask for it.

Others suggested this could be done more by the Crown research institutes.

A perhaps surprising development was the number of journalists who said they would be comfortable with the SMC “pitching” stories more to them. This was not only the younger journalists: two of the more “old school” journalists interviewed suggested this could be done more by the centre.

¹⁶ Reporter, television.

¹⁷ Freelance writer.

“They should not be afraid to pick up the phone...sometimes with PR people you get so [annoyed] you want to hang up on them but there are one or two I know, I value their world view and they know their industry...Peter and his team are in that category.”¹⁸

November 2009

¹⁸ Journalist, magazine.