Researching the UK Science Media Centre

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Impact of the Science Media Centre on Science Reporting in UK Newspapers

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ABSTRACT

• The influence of the SMC on science reporting in the UK needed to be quantified - to provide context for the general debate around their agenda, purpose and usefulness.

• This investigation looked into the influence of two services the SMC provide: "Roundups & Rapid Reactions" and "Briefings"

• Roundups & Rapid Reactions consist of lists of statements from experts in the relevant field, compiled for the benefit of science journalists

• Briefings are used to provide expert opinions for use by the media when an important scientific event occurs
METHODOLOGY

• All British national newspaper articles within two weeks of the expert reactions were considered

• The names of the experts were used as the search term

• Inter-coder reliability checked

• The group coded the same article initially and discrepancies used to amend the coding frame

• The results from the coding of each article were summated for analysis
The media will do science better when scientists do the media better

Fiona Fox
RESULTS

Expert reactions

54 per cent of the expert reactions during the time period were covered in the news.

Of these, 23 per cent did not use an independent source.

Of those that did, only 32 per cent of the external sources offered an opposing view to that offered by the expert in the SMC expert reaction.
Case study

- Paralysed rats learn to walk again

Swiss research describes the stimulation of neurons connected to the injured spinal cords of paralysed rats to repair damage, to the extent that the rats can learn to walk again. The quote below was sent out in addition to those from the Australian SMC.

Dr Elizabeth Bradbury, Medical Research Council Senior Fellow, King's College London, said:
Paralysed rats learn to walk again

Covered by:
The Sun
Sunday Times
Telegraph
Daily Mail
The Mirror
The Times
New hope for the paralysed: Breakthrough sees rats with broken backs able to run in just two weeks

By TAMARA COHEN

PUBLISHED: 19:14, 31 May 2012 | UPDATED: 12:18, 1 June 2012

Paralysed patients have been given fresh hope after scientists enabled rats with severed spines to run again.

Using a cocktail of drugs and electrical impulses, researchers ‘regrew’ nerves linking the spinal cord to the brain.

After two weeks, the animals were not only able to walk, but climb stairs and run.
SMC expert

This is ground-breaking research and offers great hope for the future of restoring function to spinal-injured patients, however some questions remain before we know how useful this approach may be in humans.

Dr Elizabeth Bradbury, King’s College London
Daily Mail
Rats learning to walk again is impressive, but 'hopemongering' is dangerous in spinal injury research

By MICHAEL HANLON

PUBLISHED: 12:21, 1 June 2012 | UPDATED: 12:21, 1 June 2012

Journalists who write about health and science are often accused of scaremongering. Coffee will kill you, meat will give you cancer, watch out for those mobile phones!
RESULTS

Briefings

60 per cent of the articles covering the briefings did not use an independent source.
CONCLUSIONS

• There are more journalists than there should be that are only using experts from the SMC and not consulting independent sources.

• Of the two services, journalists using the briefings service are less likely to consult an independent expert than those using the rapid reactions service.