

# Written evidence submitted by Dr David Whitehouse (COM0115)

## SUMMARY

The scientific establishment has become very effective at gaining control of science journalism.

Journalists need to be more independent and authoritative in their own right.

A wider diversity of stories and experts in the media is required.

A more investigative spirit is required, and more real scoops.

The willingness to break the pack mentality and say no to some stories that aren't important. People will find them elsewhere on the internet.

More confidence among journalists at analysing data and in the use of statistics.

1. I have been involved with science communication and science journalism for over 35 years. I started when I was a student and continued when I was a scientist at Jodrell Bank and University College London. In 1988 I became Science Correspondent for BBC radio, and from 1998 until 2006 was Science Editor for BBC News Online. I have been the most highly scientifically qualified science journalist working in BBC News, and have won many awards for my work.

2. My submission concerns the state of science journalism. I have several concerns concerning its reliance on embargoes and press releases as well as its subservience to, and lack of independence from, the scientific establishment.

3. The embargo system of news release is more firmly entrenched in science journalism than in other forms of journalism. In my view this is not a good thing. It involves sending details of scientific papers to journalists provided they agree not to publish until the embargoed time, usually a few days later. The embargo system began in the 1960s. Journals say embargoes create a level playing field amongst journalists and concentrates attention on serious research that has been approved by other scientists. They add that it gives them time to time to work on their reports, carry out filming and interviews, so that they get the science right.

4. In my opinion the regular use of embargoes by the major journals works against science journalism. It is something that journalists adhere to because they have no choice if they want to stay plugged into the journal's steady stream of stories. No other area of journalism has such a cosy and secretive arrangement. With the embargo system it's easy to churn out story after story, almost identical to other outlets, without leaving your desk. It encourages lazy reporting, and props up poor journalists. What good journalist wants such a level playing field? Journalists, if they are up to the job, are hunters wanting to get the best stories for their outlets first, and are skilled in producing accurate reports to tight deadlines. Embargoes encourage a pack mentality and reduces diversity between news outlets. The principle effect of embargoes on science journalism is to neutralise competition. When it comes to "getting the science right," journalists shouldn't need such convenient and organised help. Scoops, what every journalist should want, are far less common than they used to be as the embargo process militates against them.

5. The embargo system acts as a marketing tool for journals allowing them to maximise publicity and thus be a bigger draw for advertisers. I believe it is wrong that research that has been funded by the taxpayer is being manipulated for the commercial interests of a private company or an international consortium.

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6. Many scientists dislike embargoes and resent being unable to talk to a journalist about their work if they subsequently want to submit it to a journal because it will be rejected if it has already been aired in the media. Journals and the private companies behind them have no business telling scientists who they can and cannot talk to, or hold their careers hostage this way.

7. I see embargoes as an interference in the process of science and in the flow of information between scientists and the public who pay their wages. It is an example of how the science establishment controls science journalism.

8. The growth of the number of press releases and the rapid dissemination of them via the internet has changed science journalism. They now dominate science news coverage. Science journalism has contracted and been replaced by PR. News outlets have become much more similar. The spectrum of stories being covered has narrowed. It is now possible to survive as a science journalist just by paying attention to press releases from journals, pressure groups, institutions, international bodies, governments etc and reproducing them almost unchanged, and far more often than not unchallenged. This is especially the case for the BBC. A 2011 survey carried out by the University of London for the BBC Trust found that 73% of its science stories came from press releases, and of those only one in eight contained a voice not included in the press release.

9. In general the critical reporting side of science journalism has declined and no longer are scientists held to account by the majority of science journalists. It is extraordinary the amount of deference science and scientists receive in the media. Science journalism has lost its edge and become uncritical and therefore not journalism.

10. Another example of the lack of independence of science journalism concerns the Science Media Centre (SMC). It was established in 2002 and grew out of the recommendations of a parliamentary report on past science communication mistakes. Relationships between science and the media at the time was at a very low ebb due to the poor performance of science specialists in covering, or even influencing, such stories as GM food and MMR. According to the SMC's director, Fiona Fox speaking before this committee, the SMC was "set up by the science community to gain control." It wanted to be pro-active and at the time of a science story flood journalists with "ten experts in the Inbox," chosen by the SMC.

11. Before an embargo is lifted or when a news story breaks the SMC arranges for quotes from experts to be distributed. It also assembles experts for press conferences, question and answer sessions and horizon-scanning briefings. It also advises scientists and persuades them to be amenable to be interviewed by the media. It aims to be the voice of good science, a purveyor of sound scientific thinking and especially consensus and authority. Used intelligently it can be a good thing. However, it has its significant risks when it comes to science journalism, especially to the independence of the BBC which has become so intimate with the SMC. The BBC played a substantial role in its establishment and on its board of trustees and advisors. Currently the chair of trustees is an ex-Head of BBC Newsgathering, and the current Director of the BBC World Service Group is also a trustee. The BBC's Health Editor is also on its panel of advisors. No other organisation is so well represented in the SMC's governance as the BBC.

12. The SMC has also played a prominent role in the BBC's College of Journalism, formed as a consequence of the Hutton enquiry. It often gives lectures, chairs debates in the college, or moderates discussions between the BBC's correspondents and scientists. It has even appeared on the BBC's Talkback programme defending the BBC's science journalism. The SMC runs events for BBC presenters and editors.

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13. The experts the BBC features in news stories are very often the ones selected by the SMC. It may be that they are the best experts, but that is not the point. In my opinion the BBC should not outsource the selection of commentators and expert comment including specific quotes from a third party. In doing so it loses its distinctive voice and its impartiality. If such experts and SMC procured quotes are used then in the interest of transparency they should be flagged as such. As it is the relationship is hidden from the viewer and listener.

14. I think it is unwise for BBC News to have embraced the SMC so wholeheartedly. It risks being seen as not independent and too close to, even a mouthpiece, of the scientific community. In January 2010 the SMC participated in a report for the government called, "Science and the Media: Securing the future," written by Fiona Fox, the SMC's director. In the summary was the recommendation (the first one) to expand science training at the BBC via the BBC College of Journalism.

15. Whatever its motives and well meaning its intentions the SMC is a not a press centre as it describes itself, but a pressure group for science with the intention of influencing the media and getting its view on air.

16. In October 2010 the BBC Trust issued editorial guidelines that were very clear about resisting the influence of pressure groups.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our\\_work/other/editorial\\_guidelines.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/other/editorial_guidelines.shtml)

*4.4.20 Similarly, the BBC must remain independent and distanced from government initiatives, campaigners, charities and their agendas, no matter how apparently worthy the cause or how much their message appears to be accepted or uncontroversial.*

*4.4.21 Careful thought will be necessary to ensure perceptions of the BBC's impartiality are maintained when content is scheduled topically and coincides with a third party's campaign.*

17. Fiona Fox said to this committee that the SMC was set up to enable the scientific establishment to gain control. It is true that scientific establishment has been successful in gaining control. They have been very effective at doing this and have been assisted by many media outlets. It is another example of the lack of independence of science journalism.

18. Criticism and dissent, the views of minorities and the controversies they encourage, play a special role in science. Science has a particular disdain for authority. The history of scientific research shows that scepticism is essential for the progress of science. Without constant criticism no flaws would ever been detected and no dominant paradigm ever overthrown. The history of science has shown time and time again that widely held consensus views often turned out to be wrong. Why should this suddenly be different today? It is my belief that in the recent past such sceptics and minorities were encouraged and valued as an essential part of the process of science because they, more often than not, discover problems with the existing consensus or even develop a new view. In recent years however institutions and universities have become averse to dissent as it affects the various measures used to assess effectiveness and impact. This stifling of vigorous debate, however, is also stifling the progress of scientific culture and progress.

19. The media, perhaps because so few reporters have scientific experience, goes along with this and regards scientific authority as inviolate. In doing so they incorrectly define sceptics and judge them as they would in the political sphere.

20. Another mistake the news media makes is giving too much authority to papers published in peer-reviewed journals. They should be treated with more caution instead of being definitive. A paper published is just an argument thrown open for debate. Often papers

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presented as secure by the media are, unbeknownst to them, the subject of substantial debate by the scientific community. There are examples of the media proclaiming one finding following one paper and then proclaiming the opposite after a subsequent paper reaches different conclusion suggesting that scientists have changed their mind when the timing of such papers is often arbitrary.

21. A lot has been said about "false balance." This is said to occur when two contributors to a news item take opposing views. One of those views may represent the majority of scientists and the other a small minority. It is said that a 50:50 representation of two views gives the public a false impression of the weight of the minority view as equal time is given to them both. I think this is a dangerous censorial approach to science journalism.

22. Reflecting just the consensus and authority is not representing science. My view was that one should rely on the craft of the reporter to place the interviewees into a proper context. If they represent the majority opinion then say so, if their views are a minority, say so. This way even if the report only uses one interviewee, be it majority or minority representative, the viewer is left in no doubt as to the "position." In addition, I do not accept that just because there are two interviewees the viewer will assume, and go away with, the opinion that the debate is equally divided. The public are cleverer than that. If they do get this impression it is a failure of journalism.

23. Journalism is not just about relaying information, scientific or otherwise, and it is far more than relaying authority. Science journalism is also about "shaking the tree," about asking awkward questions, about standing in the place of those who can't ask such questions, and being persistent and unpopular. It is a vital aspect of democracy. Science journalism and the science establishment have become too close for comfort. Journalists have become supporters not reporters. Science journalism is neither an extension of the scientific establishment, nor even on its side.

24. If the price of science journalism is for some to tolerate the presence on air or in print of those they think are wrong then that is a price worth paying. If scientists have to debate and repeat themselves, so be it.

25. Some argue that free speech does not extend to misleading the public by making factually inaccurate statements. But it does. Being able to speak freely without censorship is fundamental to modern liberal democracies and is guaranteed under national and international law. Qualifications are made with regard to libel, slander and defamation and, in some countries, holocaust denial. The important point, and it took millennia and many lives to attain it, is that the freedom of speech principle does not mean that you have to be factually accurate. It is freedom, not accuracy or responsibility that is mandated. If someone says something others deem inaccurate then demand a say, not their silence. Whatever one's stance one should criticise, highlight errors, make a counterbalancing case if it will stand up, but don't censor, even by elimination. If this is done, we risk losing something essential to modern life.

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