

Written evidence submitted by Dan Waddell (COM0118)

Lifting the lid: how the Science Media Centre worked to facilitate the public awareness of science in 2015.

Summary

- The Science Media Centre (SMC) plays a key role in the public awareness of science in the UK and receives about a third of its annual £500K¹ funding from central government, universities and research councils².
- This charity aims to provide “accurate and evidence-based information” about science and engineering through the media, particularly on controversial stories when most confusion and misinformation occurs.
- It claims to reflect its position as an “independent” press office, one that is not linked to specific institutional interests or even to those that fund it.
- However, during 2015 the SMC went far beyond its remit on the most important science story of the year.
- Moreover in doing so it generated controversy, undermined the aims of several prominent institutions, the integrity of science journalists, public trust in science journalism, and effectively grossly misused its position of power to “spin” a story.
- These actions breached its stated aims as a charity³. Its Trustees subsequently failed to exercise the oversight that would be reasonably expected in this situation.

“The independence of the Science Media Centre is critical to the work we carry out. We do not have any specific agenda other than to promote the reporting of evidence-based science...”

Fiona Fox, Chief Executive of the Science Media Centre.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Over the previous year I have been investigating the “Tim Hunt Affair”, one of the most significant events in science communication in 2015. The actions of the SMC in this affair are not well known or understood but have extensive implications for the communication of science in this country, and thus are presented for consideration by the committee.
- 1.2 Sir Tim Hunt, an academic and Nobel laureate, attended an international science journalism conference in Seoul on June 8th 2015. Here he made comments at a lunch to honour female scientists, and which were reported by a number of science journalists. The vast majority of on-the-record eyewitnesses confirmed the accuracy of the initial report⁴. Sir Tim subsequently gave an interview to the BBC Today programme, aired on June 10th, in which he said his comments about women scientists had been “quite accurately reported” and that he “just meant to be honest”.
- 1.3 Subsequently, many in the scientific community felt that his words needed to be condemned and that it was right and proper that he stepped down from positions with University College London, the European Research Council (ERC) and the Royal Society. Sir Paul Nurse, president of the Royal Society and a friend of Sir Tim, said, “there is no question about it, he did say some stupid things which cannot be

¹ Science Media Centre, Charity Commission page. <http://tinyurl.com/zu4mw27>

² Science Media Centre, Funding page, <http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/about-us/funding/>

³ Science Media Centre, Charity Commission page. <http://tinyurl.com/zu4mw27>

⁴ Saving Tim Hunt: The campaign to exonerate Tim Hunt for his sexist remarks in Seoul is built on myths, misinformation, and spin. Dan Waddell and Paula Higgins <https://medium.com/@danwaddell/saving-tim-hunt-97db23c6ee93#.o0w0msi9r>

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supported and they had to be condemned. He said he was a chauvinist and that is not acceptable".⁵

1.4 Sir Tim sent an apology to The Guardian, to the ERC, and to the American Association for the Advancement of Science⁶, a prominent global science society, after being asked to withdraw from one of its events. Notably, Sir Tim also sent a lengthy apology to the President of the Korean Federation of Women's Science and Technology (KOFWST), who had been present at the lunch as a sponsor, and whose members had been greatly upset by his comments. The organisation had requested an apology.⁷

2. The role of the SMC in the Tim Hunt Affair

2.1 The SMC had issued a briefing about Sir Tim's comments on June 10th, 2016, including some critical quotes from scientists. On his return from Seoul, Sir Tim was contacted by Fiona Fox, the chief executive of the SMC, on either June 11th or 12th. In a blog of June 12th⁸, Fox expressed sympathy for Sir Tim and criticised the journalists who had reported his remarks about women scientists. Even though Sir Tim had already apologised and explained his actions (initiating a widespread debate on gender balance and inclusivity in STEM), Fox set up an interview between Sir Tim and the Observer in which he claimed he had been harshly and unfairly treated.⁹

2.2 The SMC is supposed to act to support evidence-based science and in the service of the media broadly. The SMC typically acts on behalf of all journalists by sending out quotes on topical subjects, factsheets and press briefings, as they did here initially. Critically, in areas of controversy the SMC is supposed to represent either the weight of evidence, or where there is some doubt about where this lays it is supposed to air opposing views. Yet it chose to represent what, at this point, was a new point of view.

2.3 The SMC is not supposed to show favouritism to one or more journalists as this offers the opportunity to steer a story. By choosing a favoured journalist to give Sir Tim a sympathetic hearing, rather than holding a media briefing for all to attend, Fox is implicated in "spinning" the Tim Hunt affair. Fox would have been able to take advantage of offering an exclusive to influence the tone and nature of the resulting story. Even the perception of spin damages the integrity of the SMC. Three times in her oral evidence to the Science communication inquiry on June 14th 2016, Fox eluded to the "weight of evidence"¹⁰ and its importance to the SMC in doing its job well.

⁵ Sir Paul Nurse: I got hate mail after Sir Tim Hunt resignation. 19th July 2016. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/science-news/11729737/Sir-Paul-Nurse-I-got-hate-mail-after-Sir-Tim-Hunt-resignation.html>

⁶ About the AAAS <http://www.aaas.org/about/mission-and-history>

⁷ Sir Tim Hunt makes formal apology to KOFWST. Press Release, June 16h 2015.

<http://www.europeanwomeninmaths.org/sites/default/files/documents/news/kofwstpress.pdf>

⁸ Call off the hunt, SMC blog by Fiona Fox. June 12, 2015. <http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/call-off-the-hunt/>

⁹ Tim Hunt: 'I've been hung out to dry. They haven't even bothered to ask for my side of affairs'. Observer, June 13th, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/jun/13/tim-hunt-hung-out-to-dry-interview-mary-collins>

¹⁰ Science and Technology Committee, Oral evidence: Science communication, HC 162. Tuesday 14 June 2016

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/science-and-technology-committee/science-communication/oral/34525.html>

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- 2.4 In June, Fox told this committee, “Our editorial decisions are made by ourselves, our board of trustees and our advisory body”. However, in the most important science story of the year, Fox intervened without consulting the charity’s board of Trustees or its Advisory Council. This was confirmed by the chair of the Trustees, Jonathan Baker¹¹, a Professor of Journalism at the University of Essex. Fox’s blog suggested her involvement was as much to do with personal feeling and opinion as the best interests of science and science communication.¹²
- 2.5 The Observer interview with Sir Tim was published on June 14th. A briefing note was not sent to the Trustees and Advisory Committee until June 15th, ahead of a meeting on June 16th, where it was added to the agenda. At the meeting the Trustees decided the charity was acting within its remit. Mr Baker said, “At the meeting on 16th June, the Trustees agreed that the SMC was acting in keeping with its remit of supporting scientists, science press officers and science journalists when science stories hit the headlines, and seeking and disseminating a wide range of views and opinions”. Given that no range of views and opinions were conveyed this is hard to understand.
- 2.6 Mr Baker has declined to reveal the contents of the briefing note, nor what the meeting was told, nor whether any of the Trustees or members of the Advisory Council disagreed with the SMC's actions. Speaking privately some of those present say they disagreed with the decision to help Sir Tim. There were others who took some convincing. Some say the tactic of supporting Sir Tim “backfired”. Others suggest Fox was not completely forthcoming about the full extent of what exactly the SMC was doing to help Sir Tim. This raises questions about how well the Trustees were able to judge whether the SMC was acting in keeping with its remit. Some connected with the SMC have also declined to answer legitimate questions. As for Fox, despite being the author of more than 4,000 words on the Tim Hunt Affair, she is yet to offer a serious response to key questions¹³.
- 2.7 This lack of openness and transparency about its role in such a controversial subject, of great public interest, is surprising. All other organisations and individuals involved in this story have been subject to a great deal of scrutiny. It is also far less than the SMC expects of others. In written evidence to the Select Committee on Climate Change in 2013, Tom Sheldon of the SMC stated: “As an organisation we support openness and transparency in all areas of science, particularly where there is media controversy.”¹⁴

¹¹ Email with author 04/07/2016

¹² Call off the hunt, SMC blog by Fiona Fox. June 12, 2015. <http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/call-off-the-hunt/> “I just feel uneasy when people are vilified, sacked or have their reputations trashed, in part because of a media storm. I want my villains to be really nasty...”

¹³ Email to author 6/6/2016. “Hi Dan, Sorry not to have answered. Life at SMC is hectic as always! And thanks for giving me the chance to respond. However as you probably know I wrote on the record about this subject at the time and I have nothing to add now to what I said then. Good luck with the piece.”

¹⁴ Evidence from the Science Media Centre to the Select Committee on Climate Change June 2013. <http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/SMC-Evidence-on-climate-change.pdf>

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3 The fallout

- 3.1 The fallout from Fox's intervention has been enormous. By arranging an interview in which Sir Tim cast doubt on the reports of his comments, Fox undermined the honesty of those who reported them. These include, Connie St Louis, Deborah Blum, Ivan Oransky, and many other journalists who had written pieces after the event. It would also go on to undermine the positions of organisations such as KOFWST, UCL and the world's leading scientific journal Nature, which called Sir Tim's remarks "belittling" and said they were a reminder that equality in science is a battle still far from won¹⁵.
- 3.2 As a result of the Observer interview, Sir Tim attracted sympathy while those who reported his comments started to attract criticism. The beginning of a genuine debate on gender balance and inclusivity in STEM, and how comments and attitudes such as Sir Tim might discourage young women from following careers in STEM¹⁶, was eclipsed by a wave of anger directed at those who reported the initial comments and scientists who had criticized Sir Tim¹⁷⁻¹⁸. By intervening in the story and defending Sir Tim, the SMC moved the debate away from gender balance and inclusivity in science towards an attack on science journalism and the motives of science journalists. Further evidence of the SMC's tone deafness to the issues of gender inclusivity that had been raised was seen much later in the year.¹⁹
- 3.3 The result of the SMC's intervention was a loss of public confidence in science journalism and science journalists, quite the opposite of the SMC's stated aims. A series of articles in The Times, which followed the Observer interview, were highly critical of St Louis, Blum and Oransky. The Times also published a number of articles supporting Sir Tim, its Home Editor, Fay Schlesinger, is also member of the SMC Advisory Committee. Ms Schlesinger has declined to say whether her role on that board, or her discussions with Fox, had any bearing on subsequent Times coverage.
- 3.4 As the backlash to coverage of Sir Tim's comments began, division and rancor was sown within the science communication industry. A fissure was created between many scientists and science journalists—one that will endure for years to come. For example, the affair led to Sir Colin Blakemore, a prominent scientist, to resign as Honorary President of the Association of British Science Writers²⁰, a group representing science writers and journalists.
- 3.5 The backlash also sparked the widespread abuse of science journalists. Louise Mensch, the former Tory MP, became a vocal defender of Sir Tim, and launched a series of ferocious attacks and smears. For example, she wrote on October 29th, 2015, "The story is no longer sexism in science, but integrity in journalism"²¹. Meanwhile, in an email to Blum, Oransky and another experienced science journalist, Katherine O'Hara, Mensch wrote: "Can I reiterate that all three of you are a disgrace to journalism?"

¹⁵ Sexism has no place in Science, June 15, 2015. <http://www.nature.com/news/sexism-has-no-place-in-science-1.17761>

¹⁶ <http://www.nature.com/news/sexism-has-no-place-in-science-1.17761>

¹⁷ Hunt and the Hunted -- PART ONE. Dan Waddell, June 8th, 2016. <https://www.byline.com/project/50/article/1092>

¹⁸ Hunt and the Hunted -- PART TWO. Dan Waddell, June 13th, 2016

<https://www.byline.com/project/50/article/1102>

¹⁹ Email party invitation sent by SMC to scientists and journalists made humour over Sir Tim's comments. The dress code for the party was to be "distractingly sexy"; guests were reminded of the need to reduce the risk of falling in love and crying.

²⁰ Tim Hunt sexism row reignited after scientist quits writers' group. Robin McKie, October 10th, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/oct/10/tim-hunt-sexism-storm-reignited-scientist-quits-writers-group>

²¹ Undark: How MIT's Deborah Blum Misreported "Schrodinger's" Tim Hunt. Louise Mensch. October 29th, 2015

<https://unfashionista.com/2015/10/29/undark-how-mits-deborah-blum-misreported-schroedingers-tim-hunt/>

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- 3.6 Such attitudes spread far and wide. Many scientists and science journalists lived in fear of online abuse. In August last year, an article in Commentary Magazine about the episode said, “In the weeks following the initial assault, some of Sir Tim’s most ardent persecutors have been exposed as liars or blinkered ideologues, abetted by cynical hacks and academic rivals on a quest to bring him down or use him as grist to a political mill.”²² No wonder that as a result of the SMC’s actions it has lost the trust of a number of science journalists. I know of six who have expressed their dissatisfaction at the conduct of Fox and the SMC. This can only have a negative impact on science communication and the public’s understanding of science.
- 3.7 Most significant of all, St Louis, who was the first to tweet Sir Tim’s comments, became the focus of media attention (see Figure 1). It is notable that St Louis has also been the SMC’s longest, and most prominent, critic, for example having pointed out that the government spends public money “twice” on disseminating science, once as part of grant money to research councils where a portion is given for that purpose and the second time directly to the SMC. It’s clear that St Louis is disliked by some connected to the SMC as a result of her opinions²³. Fox has declined to say whether her attitude towards St Louis influenced the decision to support Sir Tim. I asked Mr Baker if he and other Trustees and Advisory Council members were aware of the difficult personal relationship between Ms Fox and Ms St Louis. He said, “with reference to Connie St Louis: she has been 'a high profile critic of the SMC', as you put it, for some time, long predating the Tim Hunt controversy. Her views are well known to everyone associated with the SMC and many people in the wider field of science.”²⁴

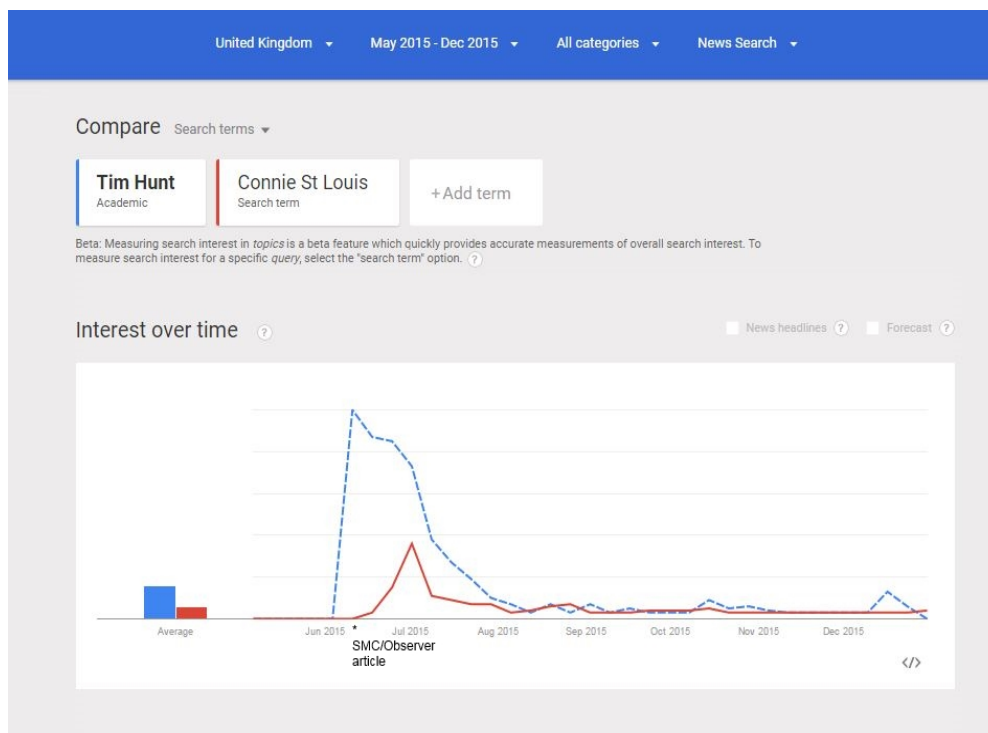


Figure 1: News search trends pre- and post-SMC intervention.

²² The Timothy Hunt Witch Hunt. Jonathan Foreman, Sept 1st, 2015. <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-timothy-hunt-witch-hunt/>

²³ Email to Fiona Fox from unnamed person 18/01/2016: 'Connie "Saint" Louis throwing accusations like a tit. Who the fuck supports Connie Titface????'

²⁴ Email with author 04/07/2016

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- 3.8 On June 26th, the Daily Mail published a highly critical story of St Louis. Fox declined to say whether she was aware, prior to the event, that the Mail was planning to write a critical article about St Louis. Neither would she say whether she had any contact with the outlet before it was published.
- 3.9 There is evidence that Fox was following the public statements of St Louis well into 2016. In January 2016 she wrote about St Louis in an email, stating that she used Twitter 'deliberately to shame Tim Hunt.' She added that St Louis was now 'claiming' to be a victim of Twitter trolling 'which apparently somehow erases any responsibility Tim has for losing his 3 jobs.' Meanwhile, in spring 2016 Fox was photographed with Sir Tim at the launch of a book written by her sister, Claire Fox, head of the Institute of Ideas. This book features an account of the Tim Hunt story which is highly critical of the science journalists who reported his comments and the scientists who condemned his words.
- 3.10 It is also worth noting that Sir Tim is employed by the Francis Crick Institute, whose funders include the medical charity, the Wellcome Trust. In 2014-15, Wellcome spent more on supporting the SMC than any other contributor and the SMC is based at their offices. Helen Jamison, the Wellcome Trust's Head of Media, is also a Trustee of the SMC. She tweeted in support of Sir Tim²⁵, including a link to Fiona Fox's supportive blog on June 12th and was present at the meeting on June 16th.

4. Conclusions

The SMC damaged public trust in science journalism and science journalists. Its actions in 2015 went beyond its remit, fell outside of the stated goals of this charity, generated controversy and derailed a significant debate about gender diversity in science. The subsequent failure of oversight at the SMC begs question about the adequacy of its oversight. Possible remedies and outstanding questions about the SMC are offered in Appendix 1 for the committee's consideration.

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²⁵ Helen Jamison, Twitter, June 13th, 2015. <https://twitter.com/drhli/status/609706989208383488>

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Appendix 1. Possible remedies and substantive questions

Possible remedies

1. The chief executive of the SMC should not appoint its board of Trustees.
2. Fiona Fox should be asked to account for her actions.
3. No one from a body who funds the SMC should sit on the board of Trustees or its Advisory Committee. Or those on either boards should not be able to contribute more than a very small amount of SMC's funding.
4. Minutes of all meetings of the board of trustees and advisory committee should be made publicly available within a month of the meeting.
5. The SMC Chief Executive should be required to account for his/her and the SMC's actions, rather than seeking to avoid answering legitimate questions.
6. The Science and Technology committee to investigate and speak to all parties in order to rebuild the fractured relationship between the SMC and a swathe of science journalists.
7. Those funding the SMC to consider whether governance at the organisation is sufficient.

Substantive questions

1. How do you square your role, and that of the SMC, with the support of Sir Tim?
2. Did your previously difficult relationship with Connie St Louis influence your decision to become involved in Sir Tim's defence?
3. Given these questions, how can you support the claim that the SMC "does not have any specific agenda other than to promote the reporting of evidence-based science?"