



# Working with the Media – Report

## Introduction

The Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre (Sciencewise-ERC) aims to create excellence in public dialogue and to inspire and inform better policy in science and technology by helping policy makers commission and use public dialogue in emerging areas of science and technology. The Sciencewise-ERC is funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). Sciencewise-ERC provides practical support to policy makers and over the past year has undertaken innovative research into six key strategic issues in public dialogue.

This report is one of a series of six covering research undertaken by Sciencewise-ERC. The research was carried out by Melanie Smallman, a member of the Sciencewise-ERC Dialogue and Engagement Specialist team.

### Others in the series:

- Enabling and Sustaining Citizen Involvement (Diane Beddoes)
- Widening Public Involvement in Dialogue (Pippa Hyam)
- The Use of Experts in Public Dialogue (Suzannah Lansdell)
- Evidence Counts - Understanding the Value of Public Dialogue (Diane Warburton)
- Departmental Dialogue Index (Lindsey Colbourne)

Other reports in the series are available at [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)

# Working with the Media

by Melanie Smallman

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Sciencewise-ERC, funded by the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS), is designed to help policy makers engage with the public in the development of policies on science and technology across Government. To find out more visit: [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)

## Executive Summary

One of the challenges of public engagement activities to date has been publicising the events to a wider audience – to increase participation and to disseminate the findings further. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is difficult to engage the mass media – even when the dialogues are likely to generate controversy.

In order to investigate these questions of reporting public dialogue by the media, this study set out to explore a number of crucial questions:

- Is the view that journalists do not want to get involved in reporting dialogue accurate or a misconception?
- Is there a role for the media in being involved in the dialogue process itself – or merely in reporting on the outcomes?
- Are there techniques that can be used to make public dialogue more appealing to the media?
- Can, and should, policy makers and dialogue professionals work more closely with journalists to improve coverage?
- If journalists remain uninterested in covering public dialogue activities, are there alternative means of gaining publicity that bypass the mainstream media?

To explore these questions, we talked to journalists and science communicators, as well as carrying out a review of recent media coverage of public dialogue.

From the review of media coverage of public dialogue from mid 2007 to mid 2008, we found that the mainstream news media appears to be uninterested in reporting dialogues unless they touch upon politically charged issues. Where interest has been shown, this has been mainly at the beginning and the end of the process - in other words the announcement of the project and a report of its eventual outcomes. There seems to be little appetite among national newspaper, radio and TV journalists to cover dialogue in a way that would 'enable' or 'encourage' the public to sign up to the process and take part.

Follow-up research with individual journalists reinforced the view that the process of dialogue (or the fact that it's happening) was of very little interest to them. Some suggested that a public dialogue might be more newsworthy if it was linked to new research findings or to a political announcement.

Most of the journalists interviewed shared the view that their role was primarily to be independent and not to 'help' people to take part. Some conceded that if the topic was of sufficient interest, they might want to host a similar debate on their own website. Although newspapers and the media do become involved in campaigning on behalf of their readers on a range of issues, the overwhelming view is that the media does not have a role in promoting dialogue between the Government and the public.

Science communicators who took part in this study agreed with this perspective. However, many suggested that despite this, communicators might be able to sharpen up their practice so

that more impact can be made on, and through, the mass media. This was explored through examining a real life case study, the Sciencewise-funded *drugsfutures* project, which examined the societal and ethical impacts of future drug use.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of talking to journalists and to those whose job it is to communicate science to the public, as well as the case study, a number of learning points have been identified to help policy makers and dialogue practitioners engage more effectively with the media. These can be summarised as follows:

- Expectations should be realistic from the outset as to how newsworthy the dialogue is, and whether it is worth spending time pursuing media involvement
- Where possible, expert public relations (PR) professionals should be involved who can identify opportunities and draw up a coherent publicity and communications strategy
- If mainstream media coverage is a key part of the dialogue process, it is worth considering trying to enlist a specific 'media partner' as they are more likely to provide the coverage needed
- Spokespeople should be appointed who are trained in delivering the messages that need to be communicated, not just trained in explaining their science clearly
- Flexibility and creativity are needed to seek out possible publicity opportunities
- Local media are much more likely to cover a dialogue if the subject impacts locally or involves local people
- If the dialogue in itself is unlikely to attract media attention, other avenues or news 'hooks' surrounding the subject should be explored
- Alternative media should be explored, including digital and online, to engage directly with citizens
- Interest and coverage should be monitored and followed up to make sure that further publicity opportunities are not lost

Outside the mainstream national, regional and local media, the study found that, given the rapid increase in the consumption of digital media, online media (particularly social media) offer huge opportunities for generating interest in dialogue and engagement activities. It does however require communication professionals to rethink how they approach publicity and marketing, reconsidering traditional news values and news 'hooks'. They also need to understand how blurred the line can become between one-way communication and two-way dialogue.

The study considered the issues that digital media raises for dialogue practitioners and science communicators involved with public dialogue. Key questions include:

- whether user-generated content and discussions can be a source of suitable intelligence for policy makers and dialogue practitioners
- whether an updated understanding is needed of target audiences to enable this channel to be used more effectively

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<sup>1</sup> *drugsfutures*, Public engagement on the future of brain science, addiction and drugs carried out by the Academy of Medical Sciences. See [www.acmedsci.ac.uk](http://www.acmedsci.ac.uk)

- whether it would be appropriate or desirable to develop an online 'debating chamber' to host Government dialogues, where people are able to 'drop in' when they have something to ask or contribute
- whether further work is needed to consider the 'rules of engagement' for an independent media functioning in the context of a more participatory democracy

As a result of the research undertaken in this study, a tentative 'recipe' for exploiting digital communications has been identified, which can be tested in upcoming dialogues and from which feedback can be gathered.

## Introduction

One of the challenges of public engagement activities to date has been publicising the events to a wider audience. The motivations for publicity can vary – from recruiting participants or encouraging people to join in an online debate, to sharing the findings with a wider audience or demonstrating that the sponsor organisation is listening. Regardless of motivation though, the mass media is seen as a key way of reaching these large audiences, and Public Relations (PR) seen as the main way of generating mass media interest.

To date however, from anecdotal evidence amongst the Sciencewise-ERC team and from experience with other Sciencewise-ERC projects, a view is emerging that attracting media interest in public dialogue activities is difficult and that the limited coverage that is generated is rather unsatisfactory. In particular, the coverage tends not to enable readers to participate – not giving details of the website, for example. The science communication specialists of the Sciencewise-ERC have therefore sought to understand more about this view. Is it justified? Are there techniques that we can adopt to make dialogue stories more appealing to the media? Can we work with journalists to improve coverage? Are there alternative means of gaining publicity that bypass the mainstream media?

## Who is this for?

This report is written for policy makers thinking of commissioning dialogue, dialogue practitioners and for communicators involved with dialogue.

The paper has been divided up into distinct sections, which should tell a story individually as well as together. You should feel free to read only the sections that you feel to be most relevant.

## Aims and objectives

This research set out to find out whether:

1. the view that it is difficult to attract media attention for dialogue activities is accurate
2. there are any techniques to make dialogue stories more appealing to the media
3. there are any alternative means of gaining publicity that bypass the mainstream media

## Methodology

We have used a variety of methodologies to produce the evidence for this report:

- Media evaluation
- Evaluation of case studies
- A series of interviews with journalists and science communicators
- Workshops with science communicators
- Interviews with digital media specialists
- Desk research

The content of this report links closely to the Sciencewise-ERC's parallel work on 'Widening public involvement in dialogue' and 'The use of experts in public dialogue' (see [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)) and should be considered alongside these other studies.

## Is our view justified?

### Review of media coverage

As a first step to finding out whether the experience of the various Sciencewise-ERC projects was a fair reflection of the way media deals with dialogue, we have sought to develop a better understanding of how the news media currently covers public dialogue in general. We reviewed the media coverage of all public dialogue events in the 12 months from July 2007 – July 2008. In particular, we asked: What aspects of dialogue is the media interested in, what makes an exercise newsworthy, and what types of dialogue are most likely to be reported?

### The research

We used the online news archives of the BBC, The Guardian, The Times, The Telegraph, The Independent, The Financial Times and The Daily Mail. We searched for articles from July 2007- July 2008 that covered both scientific and non-scientific public dialogues, and examined how they were reported. We took note of various aspects of the article, including the types of dialogue mentioned, both in terms of the subject they covered and the methodology which was used; the section in which they were reported, be it science, politics, news, or something else; the stage that the dialogue had reached, from planning to completion; the news 'hook' or angle on which the story was centred; and whether the report provided any information which would help the reader to get involved in the dialogue. From this we have drawn up a picture of how the news media covers and reports public dialogue exercises. The full list of articles included in this research is given in Appendix 1.

### What we found

In the main, dialogues were not reported on their own merits. They were usually mentioned as part of a larger article on the same subject, in order to add colour or human interest to a story. Examples include:

- the information that a public consultation was being held on the use of nuclear power, mentioned in an article on the reported dangers of stockpiling plutonium<sup>2</sup>
- results of a poll of parents about the HPV vaccine, described in an article about its provision in the NHS<sup>3</sup>
- reports of doctors calling for a public debate on prescription of statins, in an article on NHS recommendations that the drugs be given to all men over fifty<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7006056.stm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-489781/Jabs-fight-cervical-cancer-given-girls-PCT-says-Health-minister.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-wellbeing/health-news/all-men-over-50-should-be-offered-heart-pills-459332.html>

In cases where the dialogue was the main focus of the article, it was generally a survey or poll, providing easily-listed statistics, as in the BBC article ‘Concern over “zero carbon” homes’, which reported a study on the public’s willingness to make their homes eco-friendly,<sup>5</sup> rather than a more involved and interactive engagement exercise.

Statistics provided a common ‘hook’ for the story, with many articles focusing on majority opinions uncovered by polls, as in the stories about the HPV vaccine and eco-friendly homes mentioned above. Other reports focused on perceived dangers to the public, whether physical – as in the case of the plutonium-stockpiling story – or moral, which was the angle taken by many articles on the consultations about hybrid embryos<sup>6</sup> and the DNA database.<sup>7</sup> In the former case, papers seemed keen to attack results of the consultation as biased, imposing their own moral framework on public opinion. Where possible, hooks were sensationalist or politically charged, concentrating on shocking or surprising aspects of the study or subject in order to draw an audience. In cases where the object of the study was less controversial, reports tended to be more light-hearted, using a humorous angle to interest the reader, especially in studies of apparently purely scientific interest.<sup>8</sup>

As most stories were given a political spin, it is unsurprising that the dialogues that were covered most were those that approached a politically sensitive, or fashionable, subject. Studies on climate change, nuclear power, hybrid embryos and the DNA database were the most widely covered by all sources, while dialogues focused on less controversial topics were rarely covered by more than one source; talks on reintroduction of extinct native species<sup>9</sup> or plans to reduce Japanese knotweed<sup>10</sup> were only reported on one website each and were relegated to the regional or science sections, while the nuclear energy consultation<sup>11</sup> and the DNA citizens’ inquiry were covered by all outlets, usually, although not exclusively, in the main news or politics sections, and were therefore more high-profile.

In terms of method, the types of dialogue that were most widely covered were surveys and polls, which, as mentioned above, provide quotable statistics that can be easily incorporated into an article. More involved dialogues, such as citizens’ juries or workshops, were covered more sparingly, often without any information as to their findings. This may however reflect the scarcity of such events. The most common mode of coverage was a paragraph explaining that the dialogue had occurred, within an article on a broader subject, as in a Guardian article on the dangers of nuclear accidents.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7324234.stm>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/fc1bebc8-5b4a-11dc-8c32-0000779fd2ac.html?nclick\\_check=1](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/fc1bebc8-5b4a-11dc-8c32-0000779fd2ac.html?nclick_check=1)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/janet-street-porter/janet-streetporter-im-innocent-so-the-police-have-no-right-to-keep-my-dna-on-file-881272.html>

<sup>8</sup>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/main.jhtml?view=DETAILS&grid=&xml=/earth/2008/07/07/scioctopus107.xml> This example is of public involvement rather than public dialogue.

<sup>9</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/highlands\\_and\\_islands/7446062.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/highlands_and_islands/7446062.stm)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1018248/Japanese-insects-released-kill-knotweed-swamping-British-countryside.htm>

<sup>11</sup> E.g. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7006056.stm> For other references, see Appendix 1.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/oct/07/nuclearpower>

Information about the dialogue process, rather than any findings, was generally limited to the name of the organisation running the dialogue and, if completed, the dates between which it had occurred, with few details about methodology or location. One kind of dialogue that was reported in more detail however was public engagement exercises such as Dana Centre lectures<sup>13</sup> or events for National Science Week.<sup>14</sup> In these cases dates and locations are given, often as events listings or as part of an article on the need for more public engagement. It seems that, in general, media sources are unwilling to go into great detail on the process of public dialogue, preferring to give basic information and focus on results.

Most reporting was of dialogues that had either been completed, or were yet to begin. Completed dialogues were generally reported in terms of their findings, while potential dialogues were reported with angles such as, 'Gordon Brown calls for debate on sustainable energy'.<sup>15</sup> There was often little or no follow-up reporting on potential dialogues, even in cases where the dialogue did in fact occur; an example is the Department of Health social care consultation, which was the subject of a question and answer page on the BBC website, but was not reported further.<sup>16</sup> This had the effect of making it unclear to the casual reader whether the dialogue had gone forward, or whether it had been abandoned. Reporting of ongoing dialogues was much rarer, usually only occurring within articles about the wider issue; for example, an article about hybrid embryo legislation might mention that a public consultation on the subject was occurring, but would be unlikely to give further details.

When ongoing or newly launched dialogues are mentioned, it is extremely rare for articles to explain how or whether readers can get involved in the debate – even when there is an online element to the debate that can be easily linked to. The exceptions to this are the more 'events'-based engagement activities – such as lectures and demonstrations, which are often covered in the style of listings, giving dates and locations to enable people to attend.

## Review conclusions

Overall, the news media appears to be uninterested in reporting dialogues, although it tends to endorse the need for greater public engagement with science. Dialogues are mainly considered newsworthy only when they touch upon politically charged issues; otherwise, coverage is limited to local interest and light-hearted humour pieces. Most interest is shown at the very beginning and very end of the consultation process, with those studies that provide easily analysed statistics receiving more coverage than those that are more involved or complicated. The public receive little or no information from the news media about how to get involved in public dialogues.

Given this review of national media coverage, and the experience of colleagues working to publicise dialogue projects, two possibilities appeared to be emerging. Either dialogue/public input into decision-making is not newsworthy, or the PR and marketing functions associated

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2008/apr/13/sciencenews>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/main.jhtml?view=DETAILS&grid=&xml=/earth/2008/03/11/sciweek111.xml>

<sup>15</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7474592.stm>

<sup>16</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4858610.stm>

with public dialogue activities are not working to full effectiveness. To explore these possibilities, we set up a series of discussions with journalists and PR professionals.

## **The view of journalists**

During the summer of 2007, we carried out a series of telephone interviews with science correspondents from national newspapers. Appreciating that journalists' time is short, the interviews were kept to a minimum (3-5 minutes maximum) to allow the maximum level of participation.

Of those journalists contacted, very few were prepared to discuss their views of public dialogue with us. The majority were either unable to find a convenient time over the summer for the interview or explained that they weren't interested in the subject.

The consensus view amongst those who did take part was that the process of dialogue and engagement was of little interest to them. They did however suggest that it would be of interest if it was linked to new research findings or a political announcement. While these approaches have been tried with varying degrees of success by Sciencewise-ERC projects, the journalists were very confident that these are the best ways of getting their attention.

On the subject of enabling people to take part, the journalists were clear that it wasn't their job to help the Government make better policy and appeared to see dialogue in that context – doing the Government's bidding rather than enabling people to have a voice. They suggested that if the topic was of sufficient interest, they might want to host a similar debate on their own website, but that the focus would be on keeping readers there rather than directing them elsewhere.

## **The view of science communicators**

Since the sample of journalists available to have a meaningful conversation with us was extremely limited, we were keen to widen the range of perspectives considered. We therefore set up a series of sessions with science communicators – the first with a small group of the key influencers within the science PR profession and the second with a wider group of science communicators at the Sciencewise-ERC workshop in October 2008<sup>17</sup>.

Both groups were in agreement that the findings from our limited conversation were good reflections on both their own experiences in trying to 'sell' stories about dialogue to the media and the views of journalists. While the wider science communication group indicated that they would be interested in pursuing the issue further with a bigger group of journalists – possibly in a workshop setting where the 'proposition' of public dialogue could be explained more clearly, the PR professionals indicated that this would not be worthwhile. Journalists are busy people and work within very clear structures that are widely understood. The challenge for PR is to work within these structures, rather than change them.

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<sup>17</sup> Workshop held on 29 October 2008 to gain the views of policy makers and others on the findings of six Sciencewise-ERC research areas, which had been looking at barriers to public dialogue and how these could be overcome.

The PR professionals also suggested that Sciencewise-ERC might be experiencing more challenges than other dialogue projects because of the close association with the Government. If journalists are keen to maintain their 'independence' and not be seen to be doing the Government's bidding, then they are more likely to be comfortable promoting projects that appear to be at arm's-length from Government, or distinct from and potentially critical of Government.

The science communicators' workshop reflected on this suggestion and wondered whether something had happened to engender this cynicism in public dialogue. One participant suggested that the GM Nation debate<sup>18</sup> might have contributed – the media seemed to be genuinely excited by the debate but felt 'bitten' by the backlash against the project.

This seems like a plausible theory and while the purpose of this project was not to discover the roots of the problem, we felt it worthy of some further consideration. We therefore carried out a very quick review of the media coverage of the launch of the GM Nation debate in April 2003. As this was intended as a quick review, we limited our review to any coverage that is still available online. Nevertheless, we found that there were indeed examples of news reports that provided links and contact details for readers wanting to take part in the formal debate. For example:

**The man in the street gets his forum on GM food**

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2003/jun/04/food.gm1>

**Public urged to join GM debate**

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2003/jun/03/gm.food>

**Public 'needs voice' on GM issue**

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/2955150.stm>

A number of factors could however be responsible for any change in media attitude towards public dialogue – there could be disillusionment post-GM Nation; public dialogue might be less newsworthy as it becomes more commonplace; it could be an expression of generally increased cynicism in the media today; or merely a quirk in timing and newsprint space. It does appear to be an issue worthy of further investigation elsewhere however.

Moving forwards, within these constraints, both groups of communicators agreed that working with the media was still a vital part of public dialogue – for the reasons we have outlined above. If it is more difficult to promote public dialogue than other issues, then we need to be even more careful that we are using the best and most creative techniques and being efficient in how we use them. The groups came up with a number of ideas that echoed the suggestions made by the journalists themselves (such as linking to new research), which we have built upon to produce our 'Lessons for effective media work' below. Furthermore, a couple of individuals in this group argued that we should be making better use of online and digital media as they are ideally set up for two way discussion and debate. Again, we consider this further below.

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<sup>18</sup> [http://www.aebc.gov.uk/reports/gm\\_nation\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.aebc.gov.uk/reports/gm_nation_report_final.pdf)

## Review of Dialogue Cases

Following conversations with journalists, PR professionals and the wider science communication community, a number of individual dialogue cases were reviewed to see how effective engagement with the media had been. One in particular – *drugsfutures* (see below) was looked at in some depth; however, there are several other dialogue cases available on the Sciencewise-ERC website, [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)

### Case 1: Drugsfutures

#### The debate

In 2006, the Academy of Medical Sciences was invited by the Government to undertake an independent review of the societal, health, safety and environmental issues raised by scientific advances in brain science, addiction and drugs.

An expert working group was convened by the Academy to take this study forward. To ensure that the final recommendations were informed by both scientific evidence and public concerns and aspirations, the group commissioned a consortium of dialogue partners to run a national dialogue with the public – *drugsfutures*.

#### Objectives of media relations activities

The dialogue process itself was made up of both online and a series of regional face-to face discussion events, in various locations around the UK. A specialist communications agency was involved as consortium partner, with the objective of attracting media coverage to:

- generate traffic to the discussion website
- encourage local people to volunteer to take part in the public dialogue events
- help disseminate the outputs of the process

#### Activities

##### Launch – targeting the national media

The project was launched at an initial event, held at the Dana Centre. The event itself was of limited news value – no Government ministers were using it to make an announcement and no new research was being released. The communications team needed to look for an interesting news hook. At the same time however, the Academy was anxious not to prejudice the debate before it began, so the traditional alternative news hook route of using statistics or tying in to a big announcement was ruled out. Instead, a press statement was developed that represented a call to action, but avoided expressing any opinions that could influence the debate.

***“Leading medical scientists have called for a national debate on drugs and drug use today (31 January 2007). The call comes in light of the establishment of an Academy of Medical Sciences working group set up to explore the impact of scientific developments that could lead to new drugs to enhance the performance of healthy brains, enable new***

***treatments for mental health problems and give an improved understanding of drug addiction.***<sup>19</sup>

The press statement also contained quotes from Caroline Flint, the then health minister, and Sir David King, then the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser. Rather than being the usual 'endorsement' statements, these were specifically developed to highlight some of the controversial issues ahead. These spokespeople were also available for interview on the day, along with a range of scientists from the Academy.

All science and health correspondents on national newspapers and broadcast outlets were contacted several days in advance of the launch, to talk through the issues and to ensure that the event was in the forward planning calendar. Press statements were sent out to those who expressed an interest and all were followed up with a phone call on the day.

### **Outcomes**

The press work around the launch secured an interview with one of the Academy's scientists at 6.50am the following day on BBC Radio 4's Today Programme. The interview focused on the potential applications of current brain science, but the interviewee successfully flagged up the drugsfutures debate. The website or ways for people to take part was not mentioned however.

### **Local events**

A press release taking a local angle on the project was developed for each of the regional and local events. Where a local scientist was involved in the project or doing relevant research, their work and participation was used as the focus. Where that wasn't the case, a local angle on a topical celebrity story was created:

***"Just days after Robbie Williams checked into rehab and David Cameron admitted smoking cannabis, Liverpool will be the home of a national debate about drugs and the future of drug law in the UK this weekend (17 February), organised by the Academy of Medical Sciences."***

***"In the same week that leading medical experts call for the UK's drugs classification system to be improved, Merthyr Tydfil will be the home of a national debate about drugs and the future of drugs culture in the UK this weekend (24 March 2007), organised by the Academy of Medical Sciences."***

The project team, relevant scientists and local participants were also offered for interview in advance of the workshops.

### **Regional media**

The regional media strategy produced an impressive level of coverage, with local radio in particular being very keen to interview participants and cover the story. Each event typically generated 5-10 pieces of coverage, most of which reflected the press release very closely

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<sup>19</sup> Full press release available as a download at <http://www.acmedsci.ac.uk/p118pressid20.html>

## Online media

To encourage people to visit the drugsfutures website and to participate in the online debate, the team devised an online media strategy. The rationale was that clicking on a link in an email is much easier than remembering a URL you'd seen in a newspaper or on a poster.

The team focused on discussion groups that might have an interest in brain drugs – groups such as those for medical professionals, those discussing mental health issues, drug user groups and so on. A member of the team was devoted to this activity, joining the discussion groups, monitoring conversation and directing people towards the web discussion as appropriate.

## Outcomes

Feedback from the discussion group members indicates that these were welcome interventions and that some members did contribute to the online debate.

## Other approaches

Throughout the project, the communications team also kept a watching brief on the national media, looking for possible new opportunities to 'piggyback' on. Towards the end of the consultation period, the team discovered that Professor Colin Blakemore was about to publish a research paper in the Lancet, calling for the government to reclassify drugs. This seemed to be an ideal opportunity as the subject and author were bound to attract media attention. Drugsfutures could enable readers to have a formal say on the issue.

The Academy contacted Prof Blakemore directly, briefing him on the consultation and asking him to mention the website wherever possible. The communications team also issued a press release that revealed some preliminary findings from drugsfutures and related it to the forthcoming research, later directing people to the drugsfutures website:

***“This week’s call by leading medical experts to improve the UK drug classification system is likely to receive popular public support according to the latest ongoing research into attitudes to drugs by the Academy of Medical Sciences’ DrugsFutures project.<sup>20</sup>”***

On the day, the team monitored early edition media coverage and, where the paper had been mentioned but not drugsfutures, they contacted the relevant journalist to ask them to include a link in the later editions. When this was not productive, the team went online to add a link to the drugsfutures debate site in the comments section of the article. This was however ruled out of order by some websites and the comment authors banned from that forum.

## Outcomes

Ironically, while this approach produced limited success, the subject matter did catch the attention of a BBC journalist who broadcast a whole programme<sup>21</sup> on the subject two weeks after the debate closed. The programme was trailed on the Today programme and as a consequence was picked up by reporters around the world. As a result, the project received coverage in every single UK national newspaper and internationally from as far afield as the

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.acmedsci.ac.uk/p118pressid26.html>

<sup>21</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/6558871.stm>

Hindustan Times<sup>22</sup> and ABC news in Australia<sup>23</sup>.

## Lessons for effective media work

Drawing this learning together then, we have produced a number of lessons for dialogue project teams hoping to work with the media:

### 1. Have realistic expectations from the outset

Public relations by its nature involves a huge lack of control over coverage. You cannot guarantee press coverage regardless of how great your PR campaign is – you're ultimately competing with other stories for news space, so whether or not you're successful is ultimately down to the journalists, editors and the agenda of the day.

So while the mass media can be a valuable way to extend the reach and impact of your work and to involve people who you might not have contacted, it cannot be a replacement for an effective and appropriately resourced recruitment strategy.

If the topic is sufficiently interesting, and the findings of your dialogue sufficiently surprising, then the media is likely to be a very useful way to disseminate the outcomes of the process.

There are however risks involved in working with the media. As we've demonstrated in the case study above, securing good media coverage means that your organisation will have to step into the limelight and be provocative – it just isn't news otherwise. If your organisation or client isn't comfortable with that, or if it isn't appropriate for your project, then your impact on the media will be severely limited. That's not necessarily a problem – you just need to anticipate it and be prepared.

Added to that, even if you have found a sufficiently newsworthy angle that you're comfortable with, the way in which the story appears in the newspaper is still beyond your control – there are risks about mis-representation and over interpretation or sensationalising. This is just how the media operates. You need to decide if your organisation can live with that. If not, hold the press release.

Other dialogue practitioners have complained that bringing your event into the media spotlight puts pressures elsewhere in the project – you could be overwhelmed by requests to participate, or a TV company might want to film a dialogue event and make particular demands which could disrupt the dialogue process or frighten away some participants.

More importantly, media coverage might also change the status of a dialogue – what was set up to be an exploration of the range of views out there, could be cast in the media as 'your chance to decide', which could be seen as binding the hands of the decision makers, for example.

### 2. Involve PR professionals

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<sup>22</sup> Hindustan Times, 28 April 2007. Jury is out on wakefulness drug

<sup>23</sup> ABC News Australia – the World Today, 17 April 2007. Smart drugs under examination

Whether they are drawn from your organisation's press office or from external specialists as part of the dialogue contract, it's important that PR professionals are involved as early as possible. As we've explained, generating media interest in dialogue is not straightforward. You will need to be as creative and as proactive as possible, so having someone involved in the project who has the knowledge of what will and won't work with the media, and who has the time to pursue various opportunities, will help you no end.

Doing PR well is the key to getting good media coverage of dialogue, according to the participants in our workshop for science communicators – no tricks or secrets, just doing what PR professionals know already:

- Finding a good news angle
- Making sure your press release is well written – the meat in the first paragraph, all the detail needed and contacts in notes to editors etc.
- Selling the story in well – sending out a press release alone won't get journalists' attention, you need to call and explain why it's a story worth covering
- Making sure your press office has all the basic details to answer any queries – where the event is taking place, what time, who the experts attending are, how the participants have been recruited, how people can take part if they want to
- Making sure your spokespeople are available for interviews at the right times

### **3. Dialogue isn't news – so find another news hook**

New 'scientific breakthroughs' are exactly the kind of story that science journalists on national outlets are interested in. They are also their bread and butter, so the reporters know how to handle them and how to sell them in to their editors. Given that dialogue itself isn't really newsworthy, tying information on the dialogue into the announcement of new and newsworthy research findings is probably the most effective way to get media coverage of your event.

Identifying potential research announcements is not difficult, but involves some legwork. If the dialogue is being commissioned by an academic institution or research funder, then you should have ready access to relevant researchers who will be able to tell you whether there are any forthcoming announcements. Otherwise, some online research will quickly reveal where relevant research is taking place. You need to talk to the scientists in question to find out if there's a possible news angle and to get them involved with the project.

New research findings aren't always available at the right time though, so if this can't work, you'll have to manufacture a news hook. Second to announcements of new breakthroughs in research, the journalists we spoke to told us that 'controversial' statements from high-profile figures are next most likely to catch their interest – Prof Colin Blakemore's call for drugs to be reclassified generated a huge amount of media interest during the drugsfutures project, for example. So if there isn't a new research announcement for you to work with, making a newsworthy statement is one way of creating a news hook.

Besides scientific breakthroughs, the results of surveys are also of interest to the media, which might provide an alternative source of news – you might have commissioned some preliminary quantitative research in preparation for the project, or you might want to commission something specially to provide some results for your press release to focus on.

Both of these approaches do however raise some problems for dialogue practitioners. In particular, you should think about whether they frame the debates in such a way that shapes the outcomes and precludes open discussion. For instance, it would be difficult to imagine an unbiased discussion taking place on whether or not the state should fund stem cell research if the Secretary of State for Health called for stem cell research to be banned at the launch.

#### **4. Train your spokespeople to deliver your messages**

The last two recommendations rely upon getting your messages about your dialogue out in a different, related context. For this to be effective, you must ensure that your spokespeople are ready to make sure your key points are made in their quotes.

So, firstly, make sure such the information you want to convey is included in the press release, in a place where it is difficult to cut – in the first paragraph or in the spokesperson's quote, for example.

Secondly, make sure your spokespeople are prepared to mention the relevant information in their live quotes. In similar situations in the past, a number of senior scientists have told us that 'they have had media training' so don't need any further briefing from PR staff. But turning the interview around to make your own points is not the same as being prepared to explain your science clearly. If your spokesperson cannot spare five minutes for your PR team to brief them on how to do this, then they probably don't have time to do the interview and you'd be best off finding someone else. Securing interviews takes considerable time and effort – missing the chance to deliver the project's messages wastes that effort.

The experience and views of the 'ordinary members of the public' who participate in your dialogues are also extremely popular interviewees so make great spokespeople, often alongside the 'experts'.

Participants may understandably be hesitant about coming forwards however and need encouragement and support. It is important to think about this in advance, so that you have plenty of time for preparation. Asking people to tick a box on their application form if they'd be prepared to talk to the media, for instance, would make some of this much easier.

The first UK consensus conference on plant biotechnology back in 1994<sup>24</sup> used this approach very effectively. Not only did the participants release their findings to the media themselves, making up the panel of a press conference, but stories about their jobs and backgrounds formed the main focus of the media work around the project launch and generated considerable media coverage.

#### **5. Monitor and follow up**

Keep an eye out for any media coverage as early as possible. Check the article against your messages and follow up immediately if any important points are missed – such as information on how people can take part. Even if you're too late to change later editions, you might be able to influence the online editions. If this doesn't work, make your points in the comments section that is often underneath the main article in online editions.

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<sup>24</sup> Durant J, Joss S. Public Understanding of Science, Vol. 4, No. 2, 195-204 (1995)

## **6. Be flexible and look for ongoing opportunities**

While you need to plan carefully, it's also important to keep an eye out for possible opportunities that arise during the course of the project – you might get tipped off about a relevant piece of research that you can piggyback on and do some proactive media work around or you might see an article that relates to your project for example. In the latter instance, think about following up with the author – they might be interested in mentioning your project in any follow up pieces, or updating the online version to make the link.

## **7. Think local**

Local and regional media are great places to get coverage – they are usually very under-resourced, so will be delighted to have some help in producing interesting copy. They also find the fact that a national project is visiting their region to be of great interest. Most importantly, local media (radio in particular) have a great impact on their audience and can be very effective in calls to action.

If you want to work with local media, think about how your project can be tailored for that particular location – do you have a scientist in that city who can act as a local spokesperson? Is there a local person affected by the issues you're exploring? Or a particular group (such as the local WI) who will be involved? If you're offering up national figures, possibly a member of the project team who will be attending the event, remember that the local radio and TV stations might want to invite them in for an interview or ask them to drop into their local radio station to do the interview down the line. That's not possible if they're on the train travelling up to the event, so make sure you schedule interview time into people's timetables.

## **8. Think about alternative media**

Besides national and local media, there is a whole array of 'alternative' channels to communicate with people. Most councils produce their own newspapers or magazines, so might be interested in covering your event. Large companies also usually produce magazines for their staff so could also be a good channel. With the advent of emails, most clubs, residents associations and support groups have their own email bulletins. If you can show why your project is relevant to them, they will often be happy to mention your event. You just need to be resourceful in tracking them down as, sadly, there's no directory of their contacts.

## **9. Think about working with a media partner**

If media coverage is a vital part of your strategy, then an effective way of securing coverage (apart from paid for advertising) is to work with a media partner. While this means offering one outlet an exclusive and might limit the control you have over the format of the discussion, the coverage a partner offers might be more in-depth and over a longer time frame. Your likelihood of attracting a media partner will be highly dependent upon the attractiveness of the subject matter of the dialogue to the potential partner.

## **10. Don't forget digital**

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, don't forget online media.

This is a developing field and new territory for many organisations, but a channel with growing impact. While the private sector is still feeling its way, it is slightly ahead of most public sector organisations in the UK and so it has some lessons that we can learn from its experience so far, which we explore further in the next section.

## Working with Digital Media

### Shifts in media consumption

We are in the middle of a media revolution. When once we had a choice of three TV channels, most households now have access to digital TV, offering tens of channels; newspapers are read online at desks, rather than dropped through letterboxes; it's as easy to watch movies on phone screens as on the silver screen. In the UK:

- There has been a **year-on-year decline in newspaper readership** since the 1990s and this decline has accelerated since 2002 – predicted to accelerate further (DCMS 2009)<sup>25</sup>
- **Black Caribbean and Black African adults are the least likely to read a newspaper** or magazine (38% and 37% compared to 74% of the UK population. (Ofcom 2008a)<sup>26</sup>
- There has been a **massive growth in the uptake of digital TV** – with 87.1% of households having access it is now as prevalent in UK households as fixed telephone connections. (Ofcom 2008b)<sup>27</sup>
- **58% of households have broadband services** (Ofcom 2008b)
- 34 million adults, or **67%**, **now go online every month**, up 7 percentage points since 2006 (DCMS 2009)
- **Time spent online per internet user has doubled** in the last five years. (DCMS 2009)
- **Television viewing of the 10-15 and 16-24 age bands has fallen** by roughly 10% since 2003 (although this is offset by increases among older adults). This decline in viewing among younger adults and teenagers largely reflects the growth of competing new media such as PC/internet, gaming, MP3 devices and DVDs. (DCMS 2009)

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<sup>25</sup> DCMS 2009: **Digital Britain**

[http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/digital\\_britain\\_interimreportjan09\\_annex1.pdf](http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/digital_britain_interimreportjan09_annex1.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Ofcom 2008a: **Ethnic minority groups continue to lead the way on digital device take-up and use**  
[http://www.ofcom.org.uk/media/news/2008/09/nr\\_20080915](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/media/news/2008/09/nr_20080915)

<sup>27</sup> Ofcom 2008b: **Communications Market Report 2008**  
<http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/cm/cmr08/keypoints/>

- **Ethnic minority groups are at the forefront of digital communications in the UK**, with high levels of mobile phone, internet and multichannel television take-up. (Ofcom 2008a)
- **Pakistani adults are more likely to have digital television (89%)** than any other adults in the UK (82%) (Ofcom 2008a)
- **14.5 million people had listened to radio via the internet by May 2008**, up by 21% on six months earlier, and 9.4 million listen to radio online every week, up 16% over six months. (Ofcom 2008b)
- The number of people who have listened to podcasts increased to 6.0 million in May 2008, up by 40% on the figure six months earlier, with 3.7 million using this facility every week, up by 95% in six months. (Ofcom 2008b)
- Internet advertising has risen by an average of 70.2% in each of the last five years to reach £2.8bn. For the first time in 2007 the internet attracted more advertising spend than the combined net advertising revenues of ITV1, Channel 4, S4C and Five (£2.4bn) and as much as all outdoor and magazine advertising spend combined. (Ofcom 2008b)

## Digital PR – what’s different?

Digital media offer access to significant and growing audiences, and is a sector that science communicators and dialogue practitioners cannot afford to ignore then. But how do you target these channels?

To gain a better understanding of how best to do this, we spoke to a number of digital PR experts – including an online media specialist from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills<sup>28</sup> and prominent bloggers, as well as consulting the books, websites and blogs of digital media ‘gurus’ (many of which we have listed in the references and further reading section in Appendix 2). Our initial expectation, based on our experience with traditional PR, was that they would help us understand how to identify the right blogs and websites to target and how to persuade them to write about our projects. But our research revealed a landscape that is far more complicated and exciting than we had anticipated.

## Four lessons for working with digital and social media

### 1. ‘Broadcasting’ doesn’t work

In the days of old, marketers would tell the world about their product or service by getting their message in as many places as possible, in the hope that enough possible customers would respond. They’d focus down on their potential customers as well as they could - advertising cosmetics in a women’s magazine, or sailing gear in a yachting magazine for instance, but on the whole it was a fairly blunt approach.

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<sup>28</sup> Formerly this area was in the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS)

All of that has changed with digital media. Online it's as cheap and easy to publish something that's of interest to one person as it is to publish something of interest to millions. Added to that, the searchability of the net means that people can find content that's of interest to them and ignore the things that aren't. This has two implications.

Firstly, the interruption model, where we try to sneak information in front of uninterested readers, doesn't work – it's much easier for viewers to skip through ads on their DVR or click away from a website that wasn't of interest. You need a different approach to your audience then.

Secondly, and perhaps conversely, it's much easier to reach very specific audiences and to target them based upon interests and viewpoints rather than simply demographics. If you want to talk to people interested in windfarm developments in rural Scotland, or creationism in the Isle of Wight, there's almost certainly a website, Yahoo group or blog that's relevant.

## **2. Social media values are not the same as news values**

With traditional media, you have to work really hard to produce a newsworthy press release, which you use to catch the attention of a journalist, who then has to compete with colleagues to catch the attention of their editor. Only then is there a chance that you might see your story in the press. It often feels like you needed to put man on the moon in order to get any interest.

As we've just discussed, it's so easy to publish online and there are so many outlets that this huge news filter doesn't exist any more – plus you can cut out the middleman and just publish yourself.

We're not saying that the news cycle isn't still alive and well – even online, those websites that follow a journalistic model are wedded to news. But for the rest of the millions of websites, that's not the case. Their authors aren't so interested in circulation figures. Instead they focus on writing about things that interest them, often for a specific niche or group of people. Since these writers know what they're interested in, they're also good at finding things that are interesting – signing up to RSS feeds for websites that interest them, doing Google searches to find new stuff. Unsolicited press releases usually fall victim to the spam filter.

Instead of focusing on the novel and newsworthy then, you need to focus on making your content interesting and thought-leading, so that the bloggers you're targeting will be interested in you. That way you'll also find that some readers will want to sign up to hear more from you.

## **3. Your key audience is a machine**

The majority of people find what they want online through search engines, so you have to think about pleasing lines of code in all of your content. This requires regularly updated material, published in a number of places and with as much thought given to keywords as you would ordinarily give to finding news hooks.

## **4. The line between communications and dialogue is blurred**

The biggest thing about online and social media (web 2.0) is the ability for users to generate content. Good digital PR makes use of that and joins the conversation rather than broadcasts

information – PR's goal is the same (to attract and keep attention) but its role has changed (facilitating dialogue).

This is of course exactly what science communicators have been arguing for in the move from deficit to dialogue. But there has also been some discussion about what constitutes dialogue – is an activity that aims to convey information or a point of view (albeit through a conversational approach) truly dialogue? The classic example of conversational marketing that is often given in mainstream PR is the crisp company that set up a dialogue with its customers about the flavours of its crisps. Now the purpose of the exercise was to increase the company's market share, potentially putting the activity into the 'communication' rather than pure 'dialogue' category of discussion. But the outcome of the exercise was that the company changed the flavour of crisps that it produced. If this is analogous to a policy change in a political context, then it would be an outcome that many 'pure' dialogue activities would be very happy with.

The point we're making then is that the interactivity of web 2.0 means that the line between communications for promotion and for policy change (or 'pure dialogue') is much more blurred than it ever has been offline – which can be both an opportunity and a challenge.

## How to approach Digital PR

Realising that online PR isn't about news hooks and mail shots but about interesting content and keywords came as a relief and a challenge to us – no more trying to squeeze news out of interesting but not newsworthy stories, but what do we do instead? We need new tools, skills and mindsets.

With that in mind, we continued our discussions with the gurus and read as much as we could about the subject. We found lots of 'how to' guides out there (many online) for anyone wanting to use the online world to sell their product, service or idea. We have listed the ones we found most interesting in the 'further reading' section at the end of the report. But we're conscious that our objectives as science communicators in dialogue – to promote the dialogue and involve more people – aren't quite the same as selling services or products or ideas. Just as we've had to learn over the past few decades to adapt the tools of traditional PR to suit our purposes, we'll have to do the same with the tools of online PR.

To these ends then, we've developed our tentative 'recipe' for spreading the word online about dialogues, consultations and engagements. Far from being from our grandmother's cookbook handed down through generations, this is a new recipe, pulled together from wisdom and experience of those in other fields, along with a pinch of our own limited experience with projects such as drugsfutures and *sciencehorizons*<sup>29</sup>. It's also largely untried and tested and so we hope it will be tweaked and updated as we learn and hear more about what does or doesn't work. Anyone involved in public dialogue – whether a policy maker, dialogue practitioner, or science communicator - is therefore invited to sample some of the ideas and feed back views and suggestions from their own experiences to the Sciencewise- ERC. This can be done through the Sciencewise-ERC website, [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)

### A digital 'PR recipe'

The following five key steps may be useful to policy makers, dialogue practitioners and science communicators in helping to build up experience and understanding of using digital PR in dialogue promotion.

#### 1. **Define who you want to reach or 'There's riches in niches'**

We've talked for a long time in science communication about the need to narrow down our target audience. But although it's a 'no brainer' to understand that the public isn't just one homogeneous mass, it's also quite useful shorthand when we're referring to the consumers of the mass media. It won't do at all for online and social media though. Here the riches lie in the niches. In other words, since there are websites, blogs and discussion lists for just about every issue, interest and taste under the sun, you need to get that specific if you're to reach your

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<sup>29</sup> *Sciencehorizons* was funded in 2006 through Sciencewise by the Office of Science and Innovation at the former Department of Trade and Industry, to ascertain people's views on possible future science and technologies emerging in 2025. See case study at [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)

audience. And if you're thinking about your audience in terms of age, social class and even geography, think again. Online there's little way of knowing if your audience is young or old, male or female and even where they are located. But their views and interests are clearly displayed.

## **2. Do your research – stalk your audience**

Once you've figured out who you want to target, you need to research what kind of sites they usually visit. This involves online legwork – pure and simple.

- Think about the keywords they are likely to use and type them into Google and Yahoo and see which sites seem to be the most popular and authoritative
- Use tools like Google Adwords to find the most commonly searched keywords that relate to your areas of interest
- Use a web-ranking tool like Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com>) to identify the most influential blogs and bloggers in your area of interest
- Read these blogs and their comments to find out what your audience is thinking and saying at the moment
- Subscribe to blog feeds so you can easily be kept up to date with discussions – usually through the RSS button
- If your own website is relevant, monitor your own visitors and find out which sites they came to you from

Use all of this information to compile your own picture of who's who online in your field of interest – which websites are most read, who's blogging where, which are the most influential. This will help you to identify target online media.

## **3. Build an online presence**

In real life, you probably wouldn't be too impressed by a total stranger turning up in your office one morning with lots of advice on how you could do your job better and ideas for new directions you might want to think about. You might even be suspicious of recommendations for lunch venues or new car choices.

It's the same in the online world – you need to build a reputation and credibility amongst the people you're hoping to reach. Remember, they can easily Google your name to find out what else you've been writing. One way of building an online footprint then is to interact with existing outlets – commenting on others' blogs and participating in online debates.

- Use RSS feeds to keep up to date with the blogs and fora you want to participate in
- Make sure your comments are appropriate and specific to the entry you're commenting upon – but also get your message across too
- Be brief and clear

- Keep involved – post and comment frequently to help build your visibility and authority. This doesn't have to mean a constant stream of statements or facts though – you could just as easily post a question
- Be authentic and open – don't try to hide where you're from or pretend to post as someone else. The Cabinet Office's Guidance for civil servants 'Using Social Media' (Cabinet Office 2008)<sup>30</sup> recommends that you consider signing off your comment with your name, job title/team and agency/department, to help give your contribution authority and context
- With authenticity in mind, think about who the best person from your organisation will be to take part in blogs – is it your press officer or would the scientist conducting the research you're interested in be more appropriate? Do you need advice and guidelines to help them?
- Check back for further comments – others might respond to your comments, which you in turn might want to respond to. There are free services that can help you do this without having to go back to the blog – for instance <http://www.cocomment.com>

Beyond commenting on others' blog entries, you could start offering articles to sites that are content hungry, building your authority further and starting to establish your reputation as a thought leader. Such sites will also often give a link back to your own site, which can be very valuable in building your own platform or outlet.

#### **4. Publish yourself or, Build it and they will come**

Perhaps one of the most surprising things about the online world is that, thanks to search engines like Google and Yahoo, it is true that if you build it (well) they will come. In fact, the more regularly you publish new material, the more regularly they will come. This is because search engines love pages that are frequently updated, so will rank you higher.

The idea behind producing your own content will be threefold – firstly, it will help establish your profile further; secondly it will help build your own following of people you might want to interact with directly at a later stage; thirdly, it will help attract blog and media coverage elsewhere. This third point is important – bloggers look for stories to comment on and link to; journalists read blogs for stories themselves too. So while posting on your own website was always a useful way of archiving material and presenting it for people you might not know about, for online media it can be as effective as pushing the 'send' button to the traditional media.

As we've mentioned earlier though, as bloggers etc are less interested in news and more interested in interesting ideas, what you publish has to be changed to reflect that. Of course it's still important to keep posting up your press releases, but think about alternative content that can offer interesting information or perspectives that people can't get anywhere else – could your scientists be sharing their experience and telling people what it's really like to be doing

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<sup>30</sup> Cabinet Office 2008. Using Social Media – Guidance for Civil Servants <http://beta.civilservice.gov.uk/> (you have to register to access!)

their research? Do any of your dialogue participants have interesting perspectives and opinions to talk about? You also need to think about your style of writing, as reading online is different to reading on paper, so needs a different style:

- Keep it short – blog postings should be about 250 words, so you need to keep language very tight and precise
- Keep sentences and paragraphs short and simple – people tend to scan and read very quickly on-line, so you need to make it as easy as possible
- Space your page out well and use bullet points, subheadings, bold and italics so that readers can find their way around the piece
- Try to develop an authentic ‘voice’ for your writing. Don’t be afraid to use informal or conversational language and even humour – corporate speak and formality generally doesn’t go down well online
- Write good headlines that explain what the piece is about - if people sign up for RSS feeds to your blog, they’ll want to know from the headline whether or not to click through to the full article
- Link to other websites and pages that you mention in the blog, or that might be of use or interest to your readers – and don’t hold back. A lot of links is good

## 5. Get found

As we’ve said, most people will find you through search engines like Google. Your biggest audience is a machine then - or the many machines that crawl the web looking for content to index for Google, Yahoo and the like. So you need to include in your copy the things that the machines look for.

### a. Keywords

One way of looking at it is to think about the results of a Google search as if it was a newspaper. Getting to the top is like being on the front page. And getting there is tough. Rather like the editors of old, you need to catch the attention of these machines but instead of attention-grabbing headlines, you need eye-catching **keywords**.

In the further reading section, we’ve listed some of the tools that are available to help you find out which are the most commonly searched keywords. Make sure the ones you choose are relevant to your project though – picking the most commonly searched terms might help you get listed in Google searches more often, but people will ultimately be disappointed and won’t hang around if they click through and find your page has no interest to them. It’s also bad etiquette.

You also need to place the keywords carefully in the right places in the article – as well as the meta-tags, search engines look at titles, headings, links, bold text and the first 25 words in particular, so make sure your keywords are here.

### b. Get links in

Beyond keywords, your ranking in a Google search is largely down to the quantity and quality of the links in to your site, so encouraging others to link to you is important. Make it easy for people to do that by including a 'link to this article' widget, as well as buttons to post to Digg and del.icio.us (Links in the further reading section).

#### **d. Let people subscribe**

Widgets and RSS feeds allow people to subscribe to your site or blog, so they are notified whenever something new is published. This really takes the worry of updating people out of your hands and is incredibly simple, so make sure you include this facility on your web pages.

#### **e. Publish on other platforms**

We've already talked about the possibility of other bloggers picking up your content through search engines, but there are other free facilities where you can publish your material elsewhere – press releases can be issued through PRWeb<sup>31</sup>; movies can be posted on YouTube<sup>32</sup>; images on Flickr<sup>33</sup>, for instance. Rather than feel you have to host everything on your own site then, use these other sites to host material – as well as increasing your chances of getting found, they'll establish a profile for yourself beyond your own site and encourage people to follow your links back to your home.

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.prweb.com/>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.flickr.com/>

## **Discussion, conclusions and future questions**

Having reviewed the media coverage, talked to journalists and PR professionals and examined case studies, it's clear to us that our original view – that it is difficult to get media coverage of dialogue - is fair, but that a more sophisticated position might be more constructive. We believe that it is difficult to attract media coverage (and likely to be increasingly so as dialogue becomes more embedded in the policy-making process and therefore more normal) but not impossible. By going into the process with realistic expectations, being very creative and nimble in your approach to PR and having great spokespeople, you can do it.

What you can't do however is rely upon the mass media to help you generate participants. The evidence and the views of journalists and science communicators alike were in agreement on this – the media do not see their role as helping facilitate dialogue, particularly not when the activity is led by the Government. Instead, we need to fully embrace the opportunities offered by digital media to engage directly with citizens, as well as continue with other non PR recruitment approaches.

### **Towards a digital future**

We've also argued that working with digital media requires a rethink of how communicators and PR professionals operate, as the needs and interests of these new media are not the same as those of traditional media outlets. Digital media also present significant questions for dialogue practitioners too however, which might help sharpen our thinking.

As we've explained, the key feature of social media (or web 2.0) is the ability of users to generate content and to interact with site owners and one another. This means that dialogue is taking place all over the web all of the time. While these online conversations might not meet all of the Sciencewise-ERC criteria for dialogue in the strictest sense, they might nevertheless contain perspectives and information of value to dialogue practitioners and policy makers – even if just as background research for a more formal process.

The second key feature of the web is what's known as its 'long tail' – the low costs to entry and the web's ability to cross geographical boundaries means that niche markets can be well catered for online. For retailers, this can be a dream – there might be only ten people in York who would be interested in a shop specialising in antique teaspoons, but with a worldwide market there could be enough interest for a viable business. But it presents something of a challenge for dialogue practitioners – if you're trying to involve citizens in discussions about stem cells, you really aren't looking for stem cell enthusiasts, but a posting on the local 'stitch'nbitch' forum might be out of place. Indeed we've argued that as bloggers are motivated to write by things that interest them, the traditional 'interruption' model of PR doesn't work with web 2.0.

### **Re-thinking traditional media roles**

At a first glance then, this might strike digital media off the list of possible ways to engage citizens in dialogues. Perhaps we should stick to the traditional media who do after all provide a bridge between the experts/policymakers and citizens? We strongly argue not and suggest that instead we should be reconsidering who we have been targeting and challenging the notion that the traditional mass media (or in fact any dialogue) reaches disinterested citizens. Newspapers might have wide readerships but they nevertheless reach particular groups of people. An even

more particular sub-set of those read a given article and, even if you get the occasional person with no interest in stem cells accidentally reading an article about your stem cell consultation (maybe it's next to an article about knitting?) we are not confident that many would volunteer to take part in the debate unless they had some personal connection to the issue or a particular interest in dialogue. Apart from those instances when projects have chosen participants off the electoral register and paid them to give their views (arguably instantly taking them out of the disinterested category), we question whether we ever have really involved citizens who aren't interested or engaged.

Instead, thinking about our audience as non-experts, and segmenting them in terms of attitudes and interest rather than demographics or professional status, might be more helpful. Online, there will be plenty of ways to reach non-experts who are interested in your topics – the people that we argue we have been targeting all along.

We also argue that the web reaches more diverse groups of people than we might at first imagine. The figures we've quoted above for the rate of uptake of broadband and digital TV, particularly amongst ethnic minority groups, suggests that we need to challenge preconceptions about where the 'digital divide' might lie. Indeed, adopting ways of engaging people through mobile phone and digital TV could in fact be one of the most effective ways of reaching people who are traditionally underrepresented or considered hard to reach in public engagement activities.

### **Effective Government debate**

While it's going to be (and always has been) difficult to target 'everyone except those who are likely to be interested' then, it might be possible to target a broad cross section of the population by targeting 'everyone who wants to have a say'. As we've said, online, it's reasonably easy to be found and to build a following relatively quickly. With that in mind then, in conversation with one of our 'digital gurus', we developed an idea to create a place where online Government dialogue takes place - a kind of digital debating chamber. It would be a place where all Government consultations and dialogues would take place and so it would build up a reputation as the place to go if you have something to say. Those who like to express an opinion would browse from time to time, commenting on the debates of interest – perhaps stumbling upon things that they might not have expected to be interesting and maybe even starting some debates of their own. Technologies and widgets such as alerts and RSS feeds could allow people to register their interests and be notified when a discussion that they'd like to take part in begins. This could be extended to other websites and blogs so that they would automatically carry a story when a relevant consultation is taking place, driving participants in from elsewhere with minimal effort. All of this is the kind of thing that happens in the web 2.0 world already, but formalising and owning it would allow it to feed into policy-making rather than being lost in the ether.

### **Future work**

In the longer term, we believe that further research and high-level discussions with media editors and owners, about their perceptions of public engagement and dialogue, would be interesting. The current 'rules of engagement' for the media were established within the context of a representative democracy and designed to ensure an independent free press. If however we are now moving towards a more participative democracy, when it is increasingly easy for Government to bypass the mass media and talk directly to citizens through digital outlets, it

seems reasonable to suggest that if they want to remain relevant in the future, the media might want to consider how they could be involved with dialogue whilst still maintaining their independence.

## **Appendix 1 – news articles about dialogue activities July 2007 – July 2008**

BBC on Climate Change Approach in India, 16 July 2008

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7509603.stm>

BBC on UK Debate on Sustainable Energy, 26 June 2008

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/7474592.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7474592.stm)

BBC on Reintroducing Extinct Native Species, 11 June 2008

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/highlands\\_and\\_islands/7446062.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/highlands_and_islands/7446062.stm)

BBC on Public Unwillingness to Switch to 'Zero Carbon' Homes, 2 April 2008

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7324234.stm>

BBC on Nuclear Consultation, 21 September 2007

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7006056.stm>

BBC on Bioenergy Conference, 13 September 2007

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/south\\_of\\_scotland/6993426.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/south_of_scotland/6993426.stm)

BBC on Research into Increasing Organ Donation, 20 September 2007

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7003208.stm>

Guardian on Climate Change Scepticism, 6 July 2008

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jul/06/climatechange.religion>

Guardian on the GM Debate, 17 September 2007

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/sep/17/gmcrops.politicalnews>

Guardian on Public Consultation on Hybrid Embryos, 4 September 2007

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/sep/04/stem.cell.research>

Guardian on the Dana Centre, 13 April 2008

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2008/apr/13/sciencenews>

Observer on Nuclear Consultation, 1 October 2007

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2007/oct/07/nuclearpower>

Times on Public Surveys About Nuclear Power, 29 August 2007

[http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry\\_sectors/consumer\\_goods/article2343748.ece](http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry_sectors/consumer_goods/article2343748.ece)

Telegraph on Public Involvement in Octopus Study, 7 July 2008

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/main.jhtml?view=DETAILS&grid=&xml=/earth/2008/07/07/scioctopus107.xml>

Telegraph on Need For Public Debate on Mental Privacy, 9 June 2008

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/main.jhtml?view=DETAILS&grid=&xml=/earth/2008/06/09/scimind109.xml>

Telegraph on National Science Week, 11 March 2008

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/main.jhtml?view=DETAILS&grid=&xml=/earth/2008/03/11/sciweek111.xml>

Daily Mail on Releasing Insects to Reduce Japanese Knotweed, 6 May 2008

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1018248/Japanese-insects-released-kill-knotweed-swamping-British-countryside.html>

Daily Mail on HPV Vaccine, 26 October 2007

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-489781/Jabs-fight-cervical-cancer-given-girls-PCT-says-Health-minister.html>

Independent on Calls for Public Debate on Statin Provision, 28 July 2007

<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-wellbeing/health-news/all-men-over-50-should-be-offered-heart-pills-459332.html>

Independent on Hybrid Embryo Consultation, 6 September 2007

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/regulator-allows-creation-of-humananimal-embryos-401511.html>

Independent on Nuclear Energy Consultation, 10 September 2007

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/energy-giants-reveal-nuclear-plans-in-face-of-rising-public-disapproval-401869.html>

Financial Times on Public Image of Chemical Industry, 18 September 2007

<http://search.ft.com/ftArticle?sortBy=gadatearticle&queryText=science%20survey&y=0&aje=true&x=0&id=070918000893&ct=0&page=14>

Financial Times on Hybrid Embryo Consultation, 5 September 2007

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/fc1bebc8-5b4a-11dc-8c32-0000779fd2ac.html>

BBC on DNA Database Inquiry, 30 September 2008

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7531588.stm>

BBC on DNA Database #2, 9 January 2008

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7177152.stm>

BBC on Social Care, 12 May 2008

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4858610.stm>

Guardian on DNA Database, 30 July 2008

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/jul/30/civilliberties.ukcrime>

Guardian on DNA Database #2, 2 August 2007  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/aug/02/ukcrime.humanrights>

Times on DNA Database, 2 August 2008  
[http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life\\_and\\_style/women/body\\_and\\_soul/article4442413.ece](http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/body_and_soul/article4442413.ece)

Telegraph on DNA Database, 30 July 2008  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/politics/2471425/DNA-profiles-of-one-million-innocent-people-should-be-erased-watchdog-says.html>

Telegraph on Social Care, 12 May 2008  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2008/05/12/dl1204.xml>

Daily Mail on DNA Database, 30 July 2008  
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1039722/DNA-database-turns-innocents-criminals-million-records-destroyed-warns-watchdog.html>

Daily Mail on DNA Database #2, 9 January 2008  
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-506917/Government-hired-experts-raise-Big-Brother-doubts-DNA-database.html>

Independent on DNA database, 31 July 2008  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/janet-street-porter/janet-streetporter-im-innocent-so-the-police-have-no-right-to-keep-my-dna-on-file-881272.html>

Independent on DNA database #2, 5 September 2007  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/top-judge-put-everyone-on-dna-database-401447.html>

Financial Times on Dialogue on DNA Database, 9 January 2008  
<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f2c787de-be9c-11dc-8c61-0000779fd2ac.html>

## Appendix 2 - References, Further Reading and Resources

### References

Ofcom 2008a: **Ethnic minority groups continue to lead the way on digital device take-up and use**

[http://www.ofcom.org.uk/media/news/2008/09/nr\\_20080915](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/media/news/2008/09/nr_20080915)

Ofcom 2008b: **Communications Market Report 2008**

<http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/cm/cmr08/keypoints/>

DCMS 2009: **Digital Britain**

[http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/digital\\_britain\\_interimreportjan09\\_annex1.pdf](http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/digital_britain_interimreportjan09_annex1.pdf)

Cabinet Office 2008. Using Social Media – Guidance for Civil Servants

<http://beta.civilservice.gov.uk/> (you have to register to access!)

Weber, Larry. Marketing to the Social Web 2007. John Wiley and Sons, New Jersey.

### Further Reading

**How to write a social media press release**

<http://www.copyblogger.com/social-media-press-release/>

**Planning a digital media campaign**

<http://www.contentandmotion.co.uk/resources/online-pr-campaign-planning-the-cm-big-five-rough-guide/>

<http://www.thedigitalbus.com/digital-public-relations-on-a-budget/>

**Writing for online media**

<http://www.copyblogger.com/the-10-second-rule/>

<http://www.copyblogger.com/writing-headlines-for-social-media/>

**Keywords**

<http://www.copyblogger.com/the-5-essential-elements-of-search-engine-keyword-research/>

**Search Engine optimisation**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Search\\_engine\\_optimization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Search_engine_optimization)

[http://www.456bereastreet.com/archive/200502/basics\\_of\\_search\\_engine\\_optimisation/](http://www.456bereastreet.com/archive/200502/basics_of_search_engine_optimisation/)

### Useful resources

**Blog ranking tools**

<http://technorati.com/>  
<http://www.blogrankings.com/>

### **Keyword search tools**

<http://freekeywords.wordtracker.com/>  
<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>  
<http://tools.seobook.com/keyword-tools/seobook/>

### **Social bookmarking sites**

<http://delicious.com/>  
<http://digg.com/>  
<http://www.stumbleupon.com/>  
<http://www.facebook.com>  
<http://www.youtube.com>  
<http://www.flickr.com>

# Sciencewise-ERC Research reports

This is one of a series of reports from the Sciencewise-ERC that cover a range of strategic issues in public dialogue as an input to policy on science and technology issues. These reports (and the authors) are:

- Enabling and Sustaining Citizen Involvement (Diane Beddoes)
- Widening Public Involvement in Dialogue (Pippa Hyam)
- Working with the Media (Melanie Smallman)
- Evidence Counts - Understanding the Value of Public Dialogue (Diane Warburton)
- Departmental Dialogue Index (Lindsey Colbourne)
- The Use of Experts in Public Dialogue (Suzannah Lansdell)



## Contacts and links

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The other reports in the series are available through Sciencewise-ERC at [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk)