



## **The Science Media Centre's recommendations on science and the media, based on our experience during the COVID-19 pandemic**

**Recommendation 1: Scientists should be encouraged to engage with the media during a crisis when their area of expertise hits the headlines, no matter how controversial the topic. Universities, research institutes and funders should support their academics to speak to journalists, including offering media training to those who want it.**

- Scientists engaged with the media during the pandemic like never before.
- The public benefitted from hearing directly from the best scientists who were researching various aspects of the virus – public access to the best science via the media was essential to public understanding and behaviour.
- The [public gets most of their information about science from the news media](#), and [mainstream news is still highly used](#).

**Recommendation 2: The scientific community and universities need to retain some capacity and expertise in their communications teams to be 'media-first' and to do research communication.**

- A rapid reaction service for the media was needed during the pandemic with quality of science at its heart. The SMC ran over 250 press conferences and issued written comments on around 1,800 breaking news developments or new studies on COVID-19.
- Many research institutions have moved away from a 'media-first' focus towards creating their own content, and communications departments have diversified to include marketing, student recruitment, reputation management etc.
- During the pandemic some research institutions struggled to meet the needs of the 24-hour news media, and were often taken off the pandemic to deal with other crises. Some said this made it harder to support their scientists doing media work.

**Recommendation 3: Newsrooms should retain and invest in their specialist science and health reporters.**

- The pandemic demonstrated the value of specialist science and health reporters who are used to reporting on scientific evidence and taking into account uncertainties – they are allies in the fight against misinformation.
- These specialists spend as much time telling their news desks what not to cover as they do reporting the science they assess to be worth reporting.
- Some scientists were put off engaging with political journalists when their comments were used to fuel political rows in the media rather than in helping explain the science.
- Articles getting the most clicks from the public were often straight, sciencey explainers.

**Recommendation 4: Scientists should stay in their lane and be ‘sciencey’.**

- Public interest is best served by scientists who comment within their area of research and expertise – scientists specialise for good reason.
- When everyone in the country is an armchair epidemiologist, scientists should speak from evidence and with reference to research and data – not opinion or ideology.
- Scientists need to earn the high levels of public trust in scientists and demonstrate trustworthiness – judging each piece of evidence on merit and changing their minds as the evidence changes.
- Scientists should rule themselves in and out of particular media interactions based on their expertise and help journalists and the public understand the degree of confidence or uncertainty they have when assessing new scientific studies.

**Recommendation 5: Multiple voices and open scientific disagreement is part and parcel of good science.**

- Government communications experts often favour clear, single public health messages and politicians were keen to say they were following ‘the’ science – but science is often messy and unsettled, especially with a new virus.

- Glossing over uncertainty and conflicting views to create a simple ‘message’ is unscientific and risks undermining public trust in science.
- Multiple voices show the public where there is consensus and where there are different views within the scientific community, helping them assess where the weight of evidence lies.
- Multiple voices also demonstrates independence and prevents leaving a void in the media that could be filled with misinformation.
- Public interest is best served by allowing lots of good, qualified scientists to have a voice and thrash out uncertainties and disagreements in the public arena.

**Recommendation 6: The communication of new scientific data conducted in universities and research institutes should be separate from government communication, and announcements of new scientific data should not be on the government ‘grid’.**

- The scientific community can strive to resist the politicisation of science.
- Independent scientists conducting studies and gathering data, even if commissioned by government departments, should be free to communicate that data separately from government.
- Communication of science carried out in universities and research institutes should be led by science press officers in those research institutes, not by government departmental communications teams directed by Number 10 or the Cabinet Office – it should not need a ‘grid’ slot.
- Publicly-funded science should be treated more like statistics where a Code of Practice stipulates official statistics should be put into the public domain independently from government policy statements.

**Recommendation 7: Independent scientists appointed to a SAGE should be encouraged to speak to the media in their academic capacity about their science.**

- Some of the best scientists in the UK are appointed to a SAGE and its sub-groups during a national crisis.
- It’s imperative their voice and expertise is not lost to the media and public – we need the best scientists to be informing the public too; public understanding of COVID-19

was enhanced hugely by them hearing from SAGE participants throughout the pandemic.

- Scientists participating in a SAGE should be supported to do media work about the science, even if they cannot speak about what was discussed at meetings or comment on the rights or wrongs of government policy.
- Clear written guidance for independent academic scientists who are appointed to a SAGE regarding media work could help those scientists understand that they are able to speak to the media about evidence – and could prevent leaving a void that could be filled by people with less or no expertise.

**Recommendation 8: The nature of scientific advice should be better explained and understood before the next emergency.**

- A lack of clarity over the role of scientific advisers and of the process and breadth of scientific advice to the government (including that from SAGE and NERVTAG, but also from other sources) allowed people to misunderstand or misrepresent how scientific advice works.
- More clarity and openness around this process could improve public understanding of who produces evidence, who provides advice, and who makes policy decisions.

**Recommendation 9: The CSA and CMO should make themselves available to the media and public as well as advising and briefing ministers.**

- Public access to the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer was extraordinary and unprecedented during the pandemic – e.g. daily televised press conferences, regular Science & Technology Commons committee sessions, off-record briefings for science journalists to coincide with SAGE documents, Science Media Centre on-record press briefings, etc.
- This undoubtedly saved lives and enhanced public understanding of the science.
- Membership of SAGE and minutes of SAGE meetings were also published.
- This was new and should be celebrated – it had not been the case during previous emergencies such as BSE, foot and mouth disease, the Fukushima crisis, the Icelandic volcanic ash cloud or serious flooding incidents in the UK.