

**SCIENCE SOURCES FOR THE MEDIA
– THE UK MEDIA RESOURCE SERVICE**

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ABSTRACT

The presentation will describe the past nine years of operation of the Media Resource Service, a free and independent telephone service, which provides a conduit between the worlds of science and the media. Data relating to usage and the areas covered will be provided and these will be placed within the context of the broad community of science communication. The relationship to the New York Media Resource Service will be sketched and the various challenges met by the Service will be given. The Service is operated by the Ciba Foundation in London which has a broad remit of the public understanding of science

I should like to thank the organisers of this meeting and especially Fred Jerome of the Media Resource Service, New York, which is an integral part of the Scientists' Institute for Public Information, for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today.

In her book *The Visible Scientist* (1977), Rae Goodell observed that those within the scientific community who were willing to speak about their work to a wider public were seen as "outsiders, sometimes even outcasts among established scientists... seen by their colleagues almost as a pollution in the scientific community – (they) are breaking old rules of protocol in the scientific profession, questioning the old ethic, defying the old standards of conduct." Many of the upheavals which have occurred within science in Europe and especially the UK in the last 15 years have led to a radical re-assessment of the place of the scientist within the wider culture. To be effective, scientists have always needed to speak to one another and to write in a way which is cogent and elegant. Now it is clear that such an imperative also operates in the interchange of ideas between the world of science and the public (whoever they may be). A need for funds and the legitimization of the enterprise of science have demanded that scientists be communicators.

The Media Resource Service in the UK provides opportunities to widen and strengthen the avenues of access to reliable and independent sources of scientific and technological information for all sections of the media in order to better report the culture of science to the public(s) who seem to be eager for such information. I should now like to speak to you about the Media Resource Service and how it functions. The Service was set up in 1985 with active help and support from the similarly named referral Service in New York which operates under the guidance of Fred Jerome. We stole from Fred many of the best ideas quite shamelessly and these ideas have proved to be as effective in the UK as in the USA. Both Media Resource Services are phone-in lines which are operated by those with a science background; this at once puts both the expert and the journalist at ease. Questions can be tried out on us without embarrassment and the expert can be asked questions by us which paves the way for him or her to speak directly with the journalist.

In the first instance those on our database are expected and have agreed to provide background information on a non-attributable basis.

Often those who have helped the media will be retained as advisers to special programmes or to newspaper or magazine features. We recruit those on the database using a variety of techniques, including advice from professional bodies, literature searches in our own Library and by liaising with Universities and Polytechnics, and thereby keeping abreast of the work supported in the science faculties.

Both the UK and USA Service use the process of secondary referral to augment the databases. That is, those approached by us following an initial search of the database provide us with the names of more appropriate colleagues either in their own research unit or department or in other locations in the UK or the rest of Europe. These contacts are then approached to see if they might help with the specific question. These contact secondary referrals are then invited onto the database. I should stress that our resource is people and all those on our database are invited personally – there is no mail shot approach! All those on the database assign their own descriptors and we use these to locate the most suitable person.

We provide assistance across the whole of science and technology. A range of views are given to the journalist where a subject is complex or contentious. It is up to the journalist to use all or some of the names, we cannot guarantee “balance” in the final article and indeed would not wish to be an arbiter of such “balance”. Our prime concern is scientific excellence and the ability to speak with authority and cogency. All sectors of the scientific community are tapped, and we work to short deadlines for news programmes or slightly longer deadlines for features.

Obvious peaks in usage have followed disasters like the Californian earthquakes, the Amoco Cadiz oil spill in Alaska, and the “arctic” weather in the UK in February (I am sure Canadians would find the coverage of this issue most interesting!) Against this there has been a steady flow of enquiries about subjects such as HIV infection and AIDS, pollution, surgery and mood disorder. Both the UK and the US service has health and medicine as the major area of interest, this is followed in the UK by general questions which include the history of science, space programmes and the support, or the lack of it, for science in the UK.

The largest number of calls come from newspapers, television, radio and magazines. Freelance science writers often seek contacts for stories which appear in newspapers or magazines across Europe. I am pleased to say that local media outlets make significant use of our services. It is in such local media that there are often no science staff and where deadlines are often very tight as are the budgets. Most of the research done by such staff is over the telephone.

Each year we carry out with the assistance of science students who are on placement at the Service, a survey of the effectiveness of the Media Resource Service in improving and widening communication between science and the media. It is clear from such surveys over the past seven years that a major proportion of the experts (over 85%) were new to the journalists – we are clearly increasing the available sources of specialist information for the media and we are doing this consistently. Furthermore, about 70% of the journalists were given additional experts’ names by the referred specialist. Those sampled also used the expert again without going through the MRS. A very high (90-95%) level of satisfaction was expressed by the experts on our database sampled who saw or heard the item resulting from their help.

Like the New York Service which provided the support and enthusiasm for our venture to succeed, we are clearly having an impact on the reporting of science and the enrichment of the culture of science in the UK and Europe. I have really only provided you with a sketch of our operation and have said nothing of the broader activities of the Ciba Foundation in the public understanding of science but would be more than happy to answer your questions.