SCIENCE MEDIA CENTRE OF CANADA
CENTRE CANADIEN SCIENCES ET MÉDIAS

www.sciencemediacentre.ca

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Exciting Canadians about science

The Science Media Centre of Canada will help journalists cover stories in which science plays an important part. This means everything from stories where science *is* the story – such as the discovery of a new Earth-like planet – to stories where science provides the crucial factual underpinning – such as citizen opposition to cell phone towers. The word "science" here is shorthand for the natural, social and biomedical sciences and also encompasses stories dealing with technology, engineering, environment and some aspects of the humanities.

The Goal:

Increased public engagement with science issues through media coverage of science that is more informed, more accurate and more incisive. Scientists, journalists, policy makers and the public will benefit.

The Users:

The SMCC will give priority to helping journalists who don't have the luxury of specializing in covering science, the usually overworked and too often underappreciated General Assignment reporters. Yet the Centre also intends to provide a range of services that will prove useful to feature writers, editors, producers and even journalists specializing in science.

The Approach:

Science media centres exist already in Britain, Australia and New Zealand; others are being formed in Japan and Denmark. The SMCC plans to co-operate energetically with them but will be indisputably Canadian providing services in French and English, responding to regional concerns and taking a pan-Canadian approach to identifying the best sources of expertise.

In fall 2008, Halifax Global Management Consultants carried out an extensive consultation with more than 400 stakeholders across Canada on the Centre's behalf. There was enthusiastic support for these program elements:

A rapid-response service

This is aimed at a science issue that erupts into hard news, such as the H1N1 pandemic or the Chalk River isotope shortage. Within a half-hour of the initial media inquiry, the Centre will provide contact details for key experts. The experts will be drawn from the Centre's own database and selected for scientific knowledge and proven ability to communicate. Plain-language briefing notes on hot topics will be ready within a day.

Media briefings on demand

When a significant story with a science dimension breaks or one is scheduled to unfold, the Centre will arrange media briefings with top experts. Initially these will be made available using Web-based software and archived online. The Centre hopes to progress to videoconferencing by making use of facilities at universities and research institutions across the country. A moderator will keep briefings on topic and concise.

Training in practical matters

An introductory workshop on handling numbers and statistics is the first training priority. Subsequent workshops will deal with interpreting complex scientific data and competing interpretations. Other relevant courses will follow in response to demand.

Getting the deeper story

Reporting on science is as much about coverage of complex, continuing themes as it is about rapid response to breaking news. The Centre will also provide the media with briefings and background material to help decipher issues with differing scientific points of view, such as climate change and the interpretation of pharmaceutical trials.

Journalism 101 for scientists

The Centre will offer scientists the chance through workshops to really understand how the media think and operate, warts and all. The insight will help them get their key points across in a way journalists will understand and note. A desirable corollary would be Science 101 for journalists, developed in consultation with researchers.

Photos, animations, graphics and video

The Centre intends to serve as a clearing house for high-quality graphics already in the public domain and also develop its own visual library, which would include stock photos, B-roll and digital animations and graphics. Other services may include a calendar of scientific meetings, with hot links to their specific websites.

Current Status

More than 75 organizations from the private, public and corporate sectors have donated $5,000 to become Charter Members. This funding has let us push ahead aggressively in these areas:

- Since January executive director Penny Park has been busy planning and implementing Centre programs, developing a strategy for sustainable funding, expanding the Research Advisory Panel, recruiting an Editorial Advisory Committee and building strategic partnerships. The first media officer, Ami Kingdon, has been hired.
- The inaugural meeting of the Board of Directors is scheduled for June 28. Board membership will encompass all the key stakeholders.
- The Centre is now incorporated federally as a non-profit corporation and has applied for charitable status.
- Office space and logistic support have been provided in Ottawa by the Canada Science and Technology Museum as an in-kind donation.
- Several dozen background briefing notes are nearing completion in a co-operative venture with the Canadian Science Writers' Association and L'Association des Communicateurs Scientifique du Québec.
- In October the SMCC hosted an introductory luncheon in Ottawa attended by more than 100 from government, corporate, research and journalism communities. Similar events were held in Victoria and Toronto this spring and others are planned.

The Future

The SMCC expects to begin operations by September 2010 and grow to a full-time staff of four or five. After initial start-up costs, annual operating costs will range between $500,000 and $600,000. No one source will contribute more than 10 per cent of that operating budget.

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