

NEWSLETTER

Room at the top

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WANTED: Visionaries from the academic, media, public and the corporate sectors to direct the governance of the Science Media Centre of Canada (SMCC).

In other words, the SMCC is looking for potential members for its inaugural Board of Directors.

The SMCC Steering Committee, which has steered the Centre's development until now, will be disbanded and replaced by the Board of Directors. This process requires approval of the SMCC's federal non-profit incorporation, which is expected shortly.

Open solicitation of potential Board members was recognized in the initial SMCC feasibility study as "an accepted democratic process that would allow for a more diverse group of candidates to step forward."



The optimal size of the SMCC Board will be about 16, with representation from each of the four sectors. In addition to gender considerations, the Board's composition should reflect the cultural, linguistic and regional diversity of Canada.

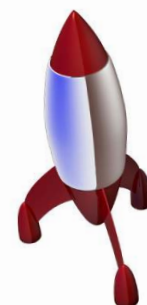
Board members should be strongly committed to the Centre's overarching goal of improving the quality and quantity of reporting about science in the Canadian mass media. Individuals can apply as potential directors or can be nominated by others. Expressions of interest should be sent to suzanne.corbeil@sciencemediacentre.ca along with concise biographical details.

Final selection of Board directors will be made by the Steering Committee after consulting widely.

SMCC rockets skyward

The Science Media Centre of Canada's (SMCC) inaugural event at Ottawa's Rideau Club on October 2nd was an over-subscribed success.

The event was headlined by Fiona Fox, director of the U.K. Science Media Centre (SMC) since 2002. Fox outlined the challenges and success of Britain's Centre and encouraged Canada to move forward with plans for its own.



SMCC rockets skyward (cont.)

Her talk was followed by a panel discussion moderated by Don Newman, formerly host of CBC Newsworld's "Politics" and a supporter of the SMC concept. Panel members included steering committee member Allison Sekuler, a Canada Research Chair in Neuroscience at McMaster University; science journalist David Secko from Concordia University's journalism department; and public policy expert David Watters, a former senior federal public servant now heading the Global Advantage Consulting Group Inc. in Ottawa.

Fox compared coverage of two science-based stories in Britain – genetically modified crops and human-animal hybrid embryos – before and after the U.K. SMC existed.

"In 1999, the U.K. had a national debate about genetically modified (GM) crops. It raged for months and saw some of the most shocking headlines on science ever produced – including one on a tabloid screaming 'Frankenstein Crops Kill' next to a picture of Tony Blair turned into Frankenstein," she told the audience of more than 100 representatives from government, academia, industry and media.



Fox said that most of the experienced plant scientists in Britain were unable or unwilling to engage in the media debate, leaving the entire field open to non-governmental organizations and advocacy groups only too ready to spread confusion and misinformation.

In contrast, Fox described the media coverage when the topic of human-animal hybrid embryos in stem cell research became an issue in 2007, after the SMC was functional.

"In the intervening years the SMC and others had spent a considerable amount of time persuading, training and preparing stem cell scientists for engaging in the media. Over 18 months, scientists briefed journalists formally on over 10 occasions, did literally hundreds of interviews and seized on every development as an opportunity to explain their science to the public again.

"The result of all this effort came last June as MPs voted by an overwhelming majority in favour of allowing research using human-animal embryos to continue," Fox said.

SMCC Steering Committee Chair Suzanne Corbeil, Vice-President External Relations and Communications at the Canada Foundation for Innovation, summed up the Canadian challenge in this way:

"Certainly no journalist wants to be associated with stories that are inaccurate but sometimes in today's over-burdened news rooms, reporters get thrown into complex stories without the time to grasp the details or identify the most reliable experts

"When the results affect coverage of federal food safety, corporate initiatives or the off-beat projects of individual researchers, the impact is that Canadians are the big losers if good science policy is put at risk because of poor communications," Corbeil said.

The three panel members not only fielded questions from the audience, but posed several of their own as well. "The SMCC cannot see its only mission, in my mind, as getting information out there," David Secko noted. "I think it must also see its role as giving Canadians, the citizens who are often under represented in the work that we do, information about science. We have to think about who uses the science media centre, and what is its role. Is it to provide information, to educate, or to advocate? Who benefits, based on each of those ideas, and why would they go there?"

Allison Sekuler noted that communicating science has to be a team effort: "We can't do it alone as journalists and we can't do it alone as scientists. Increasingly, as scientists I think we're realizing we need to not just talk about things in the high-falutin' science journals, but we also have to communicate to the general public."

SMCC rockets skyward (cont.)

David Watters, who served in senior federal financial positions, expressed concern about the level of scientific knowledge within government. "In looking at the decisions that are going to be made publicly that affect all of us, one of the concerns I have actually is whether the knowledge of science that exists within our bureaucracies, and among parliamentarians, is adequate for the situation we're facing."

Moderator Don Newman not only kept the panel debate moving briskly but he also came tactfully to the defence of the media, as when Fox noted that that some scientists were criticized by their peers for becoming "media sluts."

"Hey, wait a minute," Newman interjected. "I'd like to speak out in support of media sluts!"

In closing, Steering Committee Member Blair Dickerson, NSERC Vice-President External Relations and Communications, noted that the Science Media Centre of Canada would soon be looking to raise significant funds in order to begin operating in the summer of 2010.

Similar events are now being planned by the SMCC for other Canadian cities in order to raise awareness.

Depth = beauty in reporting science says SMCC champion Jay Ingram

The Science Media Centre of Canada (SMCC) is proud to count as a champion one of Canada's most notable science journalists, Order of Canada member Jay Ingram.

Ingram has been the host of Discovery Channel Canada's *Daily Planet* since it began in 1995. Prior to joining Discovery, Jay hosted CBC radio's national science show, *Quirks and Quarks*, from more than a decade. He was a contributing editor to *Owl* magazine, wrote a weekly science column in the *Toronto Star* for 12, and has written 10 books.

"The Science Media Centre is a great idea," Ingram says. "Just reviewing the recent coverage of the Nobel Prize winners provides a perfect example of the gaps we hope the SMCC can help fill."

He points out that despite the fact that Canadian-born, Canadian-educated researcher Willard Boyle received the most important science prize on the globe, "nobody in the media could actually decipher what he had done. All the stories were focused on the fact the he was born in Nova Scotia, and that he's now 85 years old."

With a Science Media Centre to help reporters unravel the significance and the benefits of the work scientists do, Ingram says, "we could look forward to much better coverage of science stories."

When writing about science, Ingram points out, "A lot of the beauty is in the depth of the information...if you don't get to the depth, you can't understand the significance of the discovery. Certainly there is a role for the Science Media Centre to help television, radio and print journalists to understand significant science stories."

Centre name takes McLuhanesque detour

Getting the Science Media Centre of Canada registered federally as a non-profit corporation seemed a slam-dunk.

However Industry Canada had doubts about the uniqueness of our name, chosen to echo similar centres already operating.

On the government's registry was something called the Centre for Media Sciences of Toronto. The registry watchdogs were concerned about the possibility of confusion between the two organizations.

Initially the Centre for Media Science of Toronto proved elusive. It wasn't in the Toronto phone book and nothing turned up in Google, the default research tool of most journalists. But lawyer Keith Cameron of Lang Michener provided a Corporation Profile from Ontario which listed a Nelson Thall as the head office contact and a street address.

That's when the fun began. The Toronto phone book yielded up an N. Thall at that address. A telephone call ensued from the SMCC's Resident Sleuth (aka Peter Calamai).

Sleuth: I'm calling for Nelson Thall.

Other end: Yes.

Sleuth: The Nelson Thall associated with the Centre for Media Sciences of Toronto.

Other end: No.

Non-plussed, the Resident Sleuth pursued other avenues of inquiry, all leading to dead ends. In desperation he called again to the Toronto number.

Sleuth: I'm calling for Nelson Thall.

Other end: I'm his cousin. Can I take a message?

Sleuth: It's rather important that I speak to Mr. Thall himself.

[a pause]

Other end: Nelson Thall here.

Sleuth: [launches into long explanation of conflicting names, etc]

Other end: Oh, you want my father!

When finally contacted, Nelson Thall Sr. explained all. The Centre for Media Sciences of Toronto had been established by an associate of media guru Marshall McLuhan, whom Thall also knew well. As a favour Thall let his name stand as an officer on the list of company directors. When the friend died in the mid-1990s, Thall assumed the estate had wound up the corporation.

In any event, the Centre for Media Sciences of Toronto has long been moribund. Thall signed a formal letter saying so and that he consented to the use of the name Science Media Centre of Canada.

It may not have been a slam-dunk but we can now be inspired by the thought that "the Science Media is the message."

Global help for coverage of climate change

A globe-spanning telecommunications hook-up in September let science media centres around the world successfully co-ordinate their efforts for journalists covering COP-15, the mammoth climate change conference taking place in Copenhagen Dec. 7-18.

On the line were SMC representatives from the U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Local input was provided by Morten Busch, the news director of Experimentarium, the National Danish Science Centre.

A key question for SMCs was whether journalists from their countries would actually be attending the conference in person, or trying to provide coverage from their home base. In either case, the consensus was that much of the reporting would focus on national policy positions and on the aspects of climate change seen to have the most relevance domestically.

Two participants drew upon their experience in attending previous Conference of the Parties (COP) sessions – Peter Calamai from the SMCC covered the December 2005 conference in Montreal as a reporter and Susannah Eliot, executive director of the Australian SMC, had been an observer at the COP in Bali in 2007.

The hour-long discussion produced agreement on working to arrange a generic SMC presence at COP-15. The centres also agreed to co-ordinate roll-outs for several important research studies scheduled for public release before COP-15, including the latest annual report on carbon emissions worldwide from the Global Carbon Project and an independent report updating the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Also taking part in the 6:30 a.m. call on behalf of the SMCC was steering committee member Penny Park.

The Webex technology used for the call allows participants to view slides from a central source while discussing. The SMCC is investigating its use for news media briefings.

News Briefs

Online poll backs Centre

The idea of the SMCC garnered strong support from respondents to a survey on the Centre's website. An interested 41 users replied to the question "Does Canada need the SMCC?" with 25 saying Yes, four No and one Unsure.

If your math sense tingled, that's good. There were nine who clicked on the option "If Calamai says so, then I agree." There is no way of knowing if this was the same person clicking nine times. (Or indeed whether this individual was Peter Calamai himself.)

The survey, which was begun in February, was removed Sept. 21 after the decision to launch the SMCC on Oct. 2.

News Briefs (cont.)

New meaning for university press

Nature abhors a vacuum. So it's not surprising that 39 top U.S. universities (plus McGill) have launched Futurity.org, a website that showcases information about their best research. The initiative is aimed at lay readers, with the universities citing the crisis in science journalism as the reason for this direct marketing approach.

Press releases submitted by member schools receive light editing, but there is no further reporting into the claims made.

The U.S. National Science Foundation is pursuing similar quasi-journalism. The NSF hired the CNN science reporting team cast adrift by budget-cutting. Their stories about NSF-funded research appear on the website of U.S. News & World Report.

Centre concept contagious

The science media centre idea is spreading into Asia and Africa. To gather more information about the concept, the Academy of Science of South Africa sent communications officer Patsy Schultz to the World Conference of Science Journalists in London (see story below). The Academy is also investigating helping launch similar undertakings in Nigeria and Uganda.

While the South African proposal is still awaiting funding, a Japanese proposal secured modest financial backing for three years and is aiming to begin limited operations before the end of the year. The Japanese effort is based at Waseda University.

Finally, another SMC is about to spring up in Europe, joining the world's first which began operating in Britain in 2002. The National Danish Science Centre (also called the Experimentarium) is the prospective home and a group there is currently pursuing funding.

SMCs shine at world confab



Science media centres from around the world strutted their stuff this summer at the Sixth World Conference of Science Journalists in London.

The June 29-July 2 conference attracted almost 1,000 people involved in science communications – journalists, public information officers and scientists – for presentations ranging from private philanthropic support of research to the prospects for science journalism during the current upheaval in traditional media.

Two 90-minute sessions on science media centres held their own in this stellar program, drawing capacity audiences for panel discussions about the differing approaches and day-to-day operations of three existing centres in the U.K., Australia and New Zealand and the nascent Science Media Centre of Canada (SMCC).

A July 1 session heard representatives from the four centres describe the science cultures and media environment in their respective countries, and how their philosophies had been shaped by those circumstances.

SMCs shine at world confab (cont.)

For example, the U.K. centre deals almost exclusively with national media based in London and primarily with reporters who specialize in covering science, health or the environment. The centres in Australia and New Zealand, by contrast, work with general assignment reporters because there are fewer specialized science journalists in their countries (one in New Zealand) and predominately field inquiries from local and regional media.

SMCC steering committee member Peter Calamai, who organized the two panels, told the July 1 session that the media environment in Canada was much closer to Australia than the U.K. with the additional overlay of working in two languages and being next door to the American media and science superpower.

The July 2 panel focused instead on the nuts-and-bolts concerns in setting up a science media centre and keeping it running successfully. Staffing, location, operating hours, databases, workshops, press briefings and so on. SMCC steering committee member Penny Park detailed progress so far in Canada and future plans, including the intention to offer a repository of copyright-free photographs, infographics and animations which would be pioneering among science media centres.

Last chance for a lifelong bargain

What does Imperial Oil have in common with L'Oreal Canada?

Or the Vancouver Aquarium with the *Toronto Star*?

Or the Discovery Channel with General Electric?

They are all Charter Members of the Science Media Centre of Canada (SMCC).

"Our Charter Members are the foundation of this organization," says Suzanne Corbeil of the Canada Foundation for Innovation and chair of the SMCC steering committee. "Whether from the private or public sector, media or academia, they are all progressive and visionary organizations that are passionate and committed to science communication that is more informed, more accurate and more incisive."

Their support, Corbeil says, has been absolutely integral to the development of the Science Media Centre of Canada.

"At the October 2nd SMCC launch event, we honoured their support and contributions," she noted.

The opportunity for charter membership will close on Dec. 31, 2009. With a minimum contribution of \$5,000, you or your organization can become part of this important group whose vision will lead to the full operation of the SMCC, expected in the summer of 2010.

"This is an idea whose time has come," Corbeil said. "The SMCC provides an opportunity to support accurate and effective science coverage in the media that will promote public engagement, informed public policy and the culture of science in Canada."

For more information on how to become a Charter Member of the Science Media Centre of Canada, visit www.sciencemediacentre.ca



Rita Smith comes on board the SMCC

The Science Media Centre of Canada took another step forward in September by contracting Rita Smith to work on communications and fundraising strategies for the Centre.

"My interest in the Science Media Centre, and my enthusiastic desire to see it thrive, does not come out of thin air," Smith notes.

"I have worked as a journalist, and I have worked as a communications professional. I know what it's like to try to find accurate information while working to deadline, and I have also professionally been on the receiving end of several of the most inaccurate, misleading, irrational protest campaigns Canada has ever seen. This includes the protest against the Consumer Protection Act, Bill C-52, which included claims that it would be illegal for parents to feed blueberries to their children."

"I see these attacks not just as attacks on government policies or corporate initiatives, but attacks on both science and rational thought. Personally, I am thrilled to have the opportunity to support an organization which is taking a stand for accuracy and rationality."

Smith has an extensive background in communications planning and execution, designing and implementing campaigns for business and government since 1985.

As director of communications for the federal Health minister from 2006 to 2008, Rita managed two of the largest science-based rollouts ever, Canada's Chemicals Management Plan and Canada's New Food Guide.

Smith's contract covers work to be completed by the end of the year.

Steering Committee

Suzanne Corbeil, Chair	Vice-President, External Relations and Communications, Canada Foundation for Innovation
Peter Calamai	Freelance Writer/Carleton University
Blair Dickerson	Vice-President, External Relations and Communications, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada
Jean-Marc Fleury	Executive Director, World Federation of Science Journalists, BellGlobemedia Chair in Science Journalism, Université Laval
Sandrine Michard	Vice-President of Corporate Communications, L'Oréal Canada
Mary Anne Moser	Director of Communications, University of Calgary, Schulich School of Engineering
Yves Melanson	Coordinator, Media Relations, Canada Foundation for Innovation
Penny Park	Supervising Producer-Specials, Discovery Channel
Allison Sekuler	Professor and Canada Research Chair in Cognitive Neuroscience, Department of Psychology, Neuroscience & Behaviour (PNB), Associate Vice-President and Dean (Graduate Studies), McMaster University



Newsletter readers should email any suggestions to

topics@sciencemediacentre.ca