

STEMPRA

Newsletter of the Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine Public Relations Association

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From the Chair

2001 is nearly over. It seems to have been a year in which the great and powerful decided that 'something should be done' about science and the media. We've had guidelines for good media behaviour galore, the RI has put in place a media centre so that 'science journalists can do their job properly' (from Cherie Booth's speech at the Centre's opening) and The Royal Society is asking its members to send in examples of bad journalism. Despite all this activity, I feel that STEM PRA members, who deal with

journalists on a daily basis, are just going about their business and occasionally wondering what all the fuss is about. Do STEM PRA members feel that these moves to regulate science journalism are the right ones? Do you feel strongly enough to have an evening meeting on the subject? Let us know – please! A very happy and peaceful Christmas and holiday season to all STEM PRA members. With best wishes.

Dianne Stilwell

The sciBAR Machine

sciBARs have grown steadily since their introduction in 2000. The BA's Ken Okona-Mensah gives us an overview of the drive behind sciBARs and a glimpse into the future of these successful events.

Public insecurities over decision-making processes and the challenges posed by scientific advance constituted the main thrust of Professor David King's session during the BA Festival Science Communicator's forum in September. The BA's Science & Public Affairs forums provide a valuable platform for creating dialogue on such issues to people inside and outside the scientific arena. However, exactly a year ago last month, came the dawn of a fresh BA approach to bringing scientific debate out of the lecture theatre and into the public domain – sciBAR.

This series of informal discussions, held monthly in a central London wine bar, provides a remarkable way of bringing science to the public. Essentially comprising of one or two scientists and a group of people, sciBAR fosters and facilitates two-way communication giving people the chance to air their views in a relaxed environment, enabling scientists to engage in conversation with people outside their field of work. The uniqueness of these events is attributed to the sciBAR aim of promoting an audience-driven discourse in which the direction of the debate lies solely within the audience's control; as was apparent at the 'Foot and Mouth' sciBAR in June 2001.

All areas of science are embraced and all opportunities upon which to peg them are taken. To mark the most frightening night

of the year, the BA held a Halloween sciBAR special: Exploring the science of ghost hunting, with psychologist and ghost hunter Dr Richard Wiseman. Typically these monthly events draw in audiences of between 40-50 people, but this proved to be the most jam-packed to date attracting a diverse and in some cases costumed band of spooks, eager to find out what science had to say on this most perplexing subject of the human psyche.

The immense popularity of the night is a testament to the deployment of three important factors: a strong publicity and marketing plan; a popular topic on an appropriate night and an experienced speaker. Generating a diverse audience is certainly a strategic goal for publicising sciBAR and four vehicles are used to ensure it receives the broadest coverage: listings; discussion lists; posters/flyers; and BA publicity. Sometimes editorial is sent to a local newspaper which may even decide to cover the event, as was the case here. Indeed, Dr Wiseman is no stranger

Continued on page two

sciBAR
Shaken, not stirred.



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to working with the media and being the proverbial 'media darling', has received great coverage on most of his recent projects. It is therefore vital that speakers are comfortable communicating their research to a lay audience and also prepared to admit the limitations and uncertainties of their work.

Dr Wiseman, once the youngest member of the Magic Circle, led an enchanted audience through a series of personal accounts and observations from his explorations to Hampton Court and Edinburgh Castle. Disappointingly for some, these ghostly sensations often had a rational explanation but the most compelling results came from the observation that these strange experiences tended to stack up in particular areas and, more importantly, were consistent through time. This he felt posed a significant challenge for science to explain

why certain places induce these environmental changes and is currently looking for volunteers to take part in various related projects.

Throughout the evening live pictures were transmitted to an adjoining section of the bar via a TV link – helping to accommodate the extra crowds. With the whole bar completely filled, the presence of a cameraman and use of PA system, one would not be wrong in thinking the night was set for something special. This was indeed the case as this particular sciBAR was being filmed to produce a video for training BA regional officers to develop sciBAR's in their own areas – a fitting tribute to the effectiveness of the sciBAR machine.

Ken Okona-Mensah

For details of future sciBARs, log on to www.the-ba.net or email sciBAR@the-ba.net

Science and Society in the EU

The European Commission has published its latest survey on "Europeans, science and technology". This comes just after the adoption of an action plan "Science and Society" addressing some of the issues identified by the survey.

Presenting the findings, EU Research Commissioner Philippe Busquin said "Scientists have a very strong image in society, but it is an ambiguous one. ... Europe must invest in knowledge at all levels, and especially in scientific information. I am struck by the large number of people saying there is not enough science on TV. People want to learn and want to have information. A clear challenge for all is to become more professional in the way science is communicated."

The action plan "Science and Society" aims to help bridge the gap between science and society in Europe. It will support the European Member States in benefiting in a responsible manner from the advances of science and technology made in Europe.

The main results of the survey show that:

* There is a gap between science and society. Two thirds of participants in the survey think that they are badly informed on science and technology

while 45.3% declare that they are interested in the topics
* Science remains a very positive value in our society; citizens expect a lot from scientific progress and want political decisions to rely more on experts' advice

* The majority of Europeans call for reinforced control of research activities particularly in terms of consumer protection, employment and social issues, energy and science

* Although crises like BSE can strengthen the image and importance of research, scientists have an ambiguous image, especially in terms of their assumed responsibility in the misuse of their discoveries by other people

* There is large support for European research, in particular the need to better coordinate research and enlargement, which is seen to promote the scientific potential of both the candidate countries and the current Member States

* The level of Europeans' scientific literacy is stable compared with 1992 (previous survey undertaken by the Commission).

The full Eurobarometer report and action plan can be accessed at http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/index_en.html

Snips

The **Science and Engineering Ambassadors Programme** is inviting all current SET volunteer outreach schemes to become part of the national programme. Further details about the programme are available from Tim Sibthorp, SETNET, T: 020 7636 7705, W: www.setnet.org.uk

The EPSRC has launched a major campaign to show 16-19 year olds how rewarding science and engineering can be. New Outlooks in Science and Engineering, or **NOISE**, focuses on the science behind everyday topics. The campaign includes sponsorship of Channel 5's new science TV show 'FAQ', to be screened in 2002. For further details go to www.noisenet.ws

And finally, in the spirit of the festive season, according to *The Guardian*, at least one snowflake must fall on the roof of the London weather centre between midnight Christmas Eve and midnight Christmas night for an official London White Christmas to be declared.

Members

Welcome the following new Members to STEMPRA since October 2001: **Sophie Riches**, Web Editor, Society of Chemical Industry; **Bob Ward**, Senior Press and Public Relations Manager, The Royal Society; **Andrew McLaughlin**, Media Officer, BBSRC; **Isabel Miller**, PR consultant, EFMA; **Alison Stevenson**, Agency Coordinator, Central Science Laboratory; **Judith H Moore**, Assistant Press Officer, Imperial College.

STEMPRA Email Discussion List

If you haven't yet joined the email discussion list please contact stempra-request@liv.ac.uk asking to be added. Set up as a closed list with email, not website archives, only current paid members will be added! If you don't have email please contact [Rebecca Jones, E:rljones1@tinyworld.co.uk](mailto:RebeccaJones.E:rljones1@tinyworld.co.uk); or T: 0161 211 6849 with your query for the list. Rebecca is the list owner and can send messages on your behalf.

Scientists' Perspectives on Science Communication

Dr Roy Hawkey, Director of Education, The Natural History Museum spoke at the Science Communicators Forum, part of the BA Festival of Science in September 2001. The talk outlined the steps that the museum is taking to increase staff and visitor involvement in the communication of science.

The new Darwin Centre of the Natural History Museum (NHM) is being planned as an area immersed in science dialogue and communication. NHM research and collections are gradually being shaped into themes to ease presentation to the public and visitors to the new centre are destined to have unprecedented access to NHM science. Designed partly as a research facility, the centre will also include public areas with tours, multimedia support and 'science encounters' - a twice-daily interaction between active research scientists and the public.

Communicating museum science to the public has been revolutionised by the introduction of hands-on science centres across the UK, and it is good to see more

traditional museums incorporating positive aspects of such projects.

The perspectives of museum staff to scientific dialogue with the public have been compiled through comprehensive initial surveys. These have shown that:

- Most agreed that their specialist subject would be understood by most people

- All agreed that communicating with the public was a responsibility of science staff.

- Mixed results were given to the statement that 'the public needs to increase its knowledge of the facts of science'

- Most agreed that it is important that the science community decides

what is and is not 'science'

- Most agreed that it is important to maximise opportunities to open dialogue between science and the public

The results bode well for acceptance by the majority of NHM staff to increase their interaction with the public. It was stressed that full training will be devised to ensure that all parties benefit from such interaction, and that target audiences are reached in an appropriate manner. Although the majority of the science side will be shouldered by NHM staff, it was highlighted that NHM would not rule out bringing in scientists from other institutions to supplement the programme.

Kelly Quigley

Continental Communications

Maarten van der Sanden, Science Press and Information Officer at the Delft University of Technology and a Board Member of the Dutch Platform for Science Communication, tells us how his organisation tackles science communication in the Netherlands.

The Platform for Science Communication (PWC) consists of all science press officers for Dutch universities, university hospitals and university related organisations. The latter are groups such as the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). In total, approximately 40 science press officers are members of the PWC.

The PWC's main aims are the development of innovation and policy with regard to science communication in the Netherlands. Members meet at least three times a year. These meetings are divided into two, with knowledge and work being exchanged and pressing matters discussed in the first part, while larger issues relating to science communication as a whole take up the second.

PWC meetings are held at one of the participating organisations' facilities. A small tour of is often part of the event, fostering links and understanding. Besides the professional aspect of these meetings, the social

aspect is very important. Attendance is generally good and the atmosphere is always very pleasant and friendly.

The PWC administration is integrated with that of the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU). The managing body of the PWC is formed by at least three members, who hold office for three years.

The goals of the PWC are:

- to function as a platform for the exchange of knowledge and expertise in the field of science communication;

- to strengthen the function of science communication within the universities and other participating organisations;

- to initiate or activate interorganisational activities or projects in the field of science communication;

- to provide requested and unrequested advice and partake in public discussions relating to the field of science communication.

These goals are served further by an annual meeting held jointly with the Netherlands Association of Science journalists (VWN), where Members discuss what is, and what is not, going well in the field. The most recent meeting discussed the relationship between science press officer and science journalist, examining both the good and bad aspects of this often tricky pairing. Questionnaires canvassed opinions from both sides and led to practical workshops where each side had the opportunity to explore the dynamics of PRO-journalist contact.

Bodies such as PWC and STEMPRA deserve to be carried further into Europe, to find strength in numbers and experience within the framework of the proposed European Network for Science Communication.

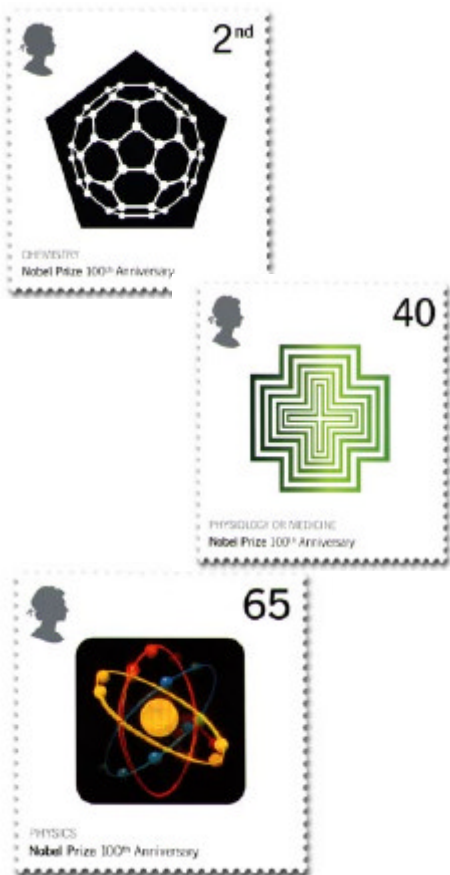
Maarten van der Sanden

Nobel Centenary Celebrated

One hundred years of Nobel prizes were celebrated in Sweden recently with a stupendous gathering of some of the greatest minds of all time. The Nobel centennial week witnessed the gathering of a large proportion of surviving Nobel Laureates from across the world to celebrate their achievements, culminating in the presentation of the 2001 Prizes at a glittering ceremony in Sweden.

The centennial has been marked in the UK with a special collection of Royal Mail stamps, recognising 'Britain's proud record in all walks of scientific and academic life' with each stamp featuring a clever technological twist.

Chemistry on the 2nd class stamp, features buckminster fullerene. A C60 molecule printed in thermochromic ink, reveals a hidden ion when heated by a finger. The Physiology or Medicine prize releases the scent of eucalyptus when scratched and Physics weighs in on a holographic 65p airmail stamp



Further information on past and present Nobel winners can be accessed at the Nobel e-Museum www.nobel.se

New Look for AlphaGalileo

AlphaGalileo launched a major upgrade to its services in November 2001. Following research among users over the past year, the new site includes expanded content including pictures and movies, additional user features and a new design. If you haven't logged on recently, here are the new features you've been missing out on:

- * fast, multilingual access to European news in English, Finnish, French, German and Portuguese, with a link to a Greek-language version www.alphagalileo.gr
- * customised email alerts by language and by subject delivered as immediate summaries, immediate full texts, daily digests or weekly digests
- * thumbnails and links to reproduction-quality image, sound and movie files
- * PDFs of articles and magazines
- * book announcements
- * an upgraded library of background material
- * improved search facilities including searching by language, keyword and country as well as the traditional free text search
- * integrated experts service.
- * the option for contributors to include their logo on all submitted press releases

www.alphagalileo.org.uk

Diary

The **2002 STEMPRA AGM** will be held on Monday 18 February at the Royal Society, Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1. Come along for pre-meeting refreshments from 17.30 for a prompt 18.00 start. Our post-AGM speaker this year will be Andrew Gay from Huntingdon Life Sciences, wine and networking will follow Andrew's talk. An agenda and more details will follow in January.

Come to a STEMPRA meeting at the new **Science Media Centre** on 22 January 2002 and meet Fiona Fox, its director and her team. Fiona has just arrived at the controversial new centre and is busy trying to find out what journalists, scientists and people like STEMPRA members, actually want from the centre. Come along and pass on your views. No charge, but as Fiona has kindly agreed to provide a glass or two of wine, please could people who plan to come let Dianne know for catering purposes. Dianne Stilwell, T:020 7470 4875, F: 020 7470 4848, E:dianne.stilwell@iop.org Science Media Centre, The Royal Institution, Albemarle Street, London W1.

All Change Please!

Are your events staff, websites, Members and promotional material ready for the euro? From 1 March 2002, all national currencies of participating counties will cease to be legal tender and only euros will be accepted.

Last day for use of national currencies:
9 February 2002 - Republic of Ireland;
17 February 2002 - France;
28 February 2002 - Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain

Euro notes and coins will be introduced from 1 January 2002, the date from which all non-cash transactions in the 12 countries will be in euros. Travel companies are advising people to buy euro travellers cheques rather than Sterling for any upcoming trips.

