



Science Media Centre

where science meets the headlines

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A submission on behalf of the Science Media Centre

What is the Science Media Centre?

The Science Media Centre¹ (SMC) is an independent press office for science – set up in the wake of media health scares and misinformation in the 1990s such as MMR and autism and 'Frankenfoods'. Our aim is to improve the accuracy and evidence-base of media reporting of science, to try to ensure the public has access to measured and high-quality information about stories important to public health and understanding, from climate change to vaccines and from genome editing to mental health.

We focus on news because that is the main source of information for a large proportion of the public² – whether that is those who still seek out live television or radio news, those that use a news app, or those that come across news output on social media platforms. Evidence suggests that social media content often includes output from the news media³ and we know that news outlets are investing heavily in getting their journalism out onto new platforms to reach new and diverse audiences.

The SMC works to encourage and support expert scientists to engage with the media when their expertise hits the headlines – journalists and the public benefit from hearing from the best and most qualified experts especially on matters of health.

The SMC often champions journalists and journalism – this applies especially to the specialist science, health and environment correspondents that the UK is lucky to have at all the main news outlets. These specialists have experience in covering complex scientific studies that often involve statistics, nuance and uncertainties. We believe the best chance of achieving accurate and high-quality media coverage of science, health and environment developments is when they are covered by these specialists.

Public trust

We know that public trust is easily lost but essential to society. There is evidence that the public knows what makes a trustworthy source and what doesn't³ – our Ipsos poll⁴ in 2023 found that people trust mainstream media more than social media on science topics, and we saw during the pandemic that the public (including young people) flocked to BBC News to access information at a worrying and uncertain time⁵. When the stakes are high the UK public knows where to go to find reliable, accurate information – and that is often the BBC, which provides factual reporting rather than just opinion or commentary, and which is independent and impartial and holds those in power to account. The Covid-19 pandemic illustrated how crucial public understanding was to public health and to society, and during this time many of the BBC's health journalists themselves became trusted sources for the public.

We hear more and more about mis- and disinformation online and on social media – we believe that one way to tackle this is by getting more good, accurate information out there. Evidence suggests that the public feel armed to recognise misinformation when they see it because they know what the facts are⁶ – the BBC plays a crucial role through BBC News and its factual output in getting those facts out to the public so that there is a base of knowledge on topics such as medicines, nutrition, pollution, and environmental issues.

We at the SMC would recommend that in order to maintain public trust the BBC continues to invest in its highly skilled specialist correspondents such as the health, science and environment teams at BBC News.

Standards and accuracy

The BBC's specialist science, health and environment correspondents are allies in the fight against misinformation – by being impartial and reporting with an evidence-based approach, rather than with opinion, ideology, or editorial lines, these journalists are crucial to public understanding and public trust. Not all news outlets have the privileged position of being able and indeed obliged to have impartiality and accuracy at their heart – the BBC does and its specialist journalists play a huge role in this when it comes to topics as important as health, climate and science. They are already doing real things every day to counter misinformation, by accurately reporting new scientific studies and medical developments. We believe an important role of the BBC is to cover the daily diary stories in a straight and factual way – especially those controversial stories that other outlets might cover with an editorial slant. This is an essential service to those members of the public that go to the BBC for accurate and measured reporting.

Just as scientists enjoy high levels of trust but need to demonstrate trustworthiness by sticking to evidence, the BBC can continue to earn its high levels of trust by prioritising accuracy and evidence-based reporting free from ideology and agenda.

The BBC has an enviable USP. Rather than following the crowd and competing with other outlets and platforms by attempting to do what they do, we believe the successful future of a trustworthy BBC lies in doing what it does that is different – accurate, factual reporting by specialist journalists that is informed by expert scientific researchers.

Use of experts

The SMC proactively and reactively provides scientific experts for journalists, for broadcast interviews and written comments for articles. We believe that among the many voices and opinions out there on the headline news of the day, expert scientists need to be prominently featured on issues of science, health and environment – the public needs more than just opinion, they need evidence and expertise, and that is what scientists can provide. We at the SMC have an excellent relationship with BBC News's health, science and environment teams and they frequently feature and interview the best scientific experts.

When other outlets might elect to feature celebrities the BBC could meet its obligations to accuracy by seeking out the most highly-qualified experts on each science and health story – different scientists for different topics (scientists after all are highly specialised by nature and not generalists).

We at the SMC would recommend that for the benefit of the public the BBC considers using credible experts more often as a means of distinguishing the BBC from news outlets that tend to select guests with strong opinions or celebrity status.

Prioritising science content

There is evidence that science content on BBC News is popular among the public⁷. There is appetite for science, health and environment news stories – while other outlets might in future be forced to prioritise the topics their readers want and at which they excel, the BBC could elect to prioritise science, health and environment news content, providing a place for the public to go for accurate, measured science coverage.

We at the SMC would recommend that to fight against misinformation the BBC prioritises science content to provide the public with high-quality information on the science, health and environment news of the day.

Recommendations from the Science Media Centre:

- The SMC recommends that in order to maintain public trust the BBC continues to invest in its highly skilled specialist correspondents such as the health, science and environment teams at BBC News.
- The SMC recommends that for the benefit of the public the BBC continues to seek out and feature highly qualified scientific experts rather than only celebrities, campaigners and others in the public eye but who lack specific research expertise.
- The SMC recommends that to fight against misinformation the BBC prioritises science content to provide the public with high-quality information on the science, health and environment news of the day.

References:

- 1 <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/>
- 2 <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/online-research/adult-and-teen-news-consumption-survey/news-consumption-in-the-uk-2025-research-findings.pdf?v=400636>
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