

Comment

The third party in the media–research relationship

Peter Green

If Europe is to become a knowledge-based economy¹ knowledge must be freely available *in* Europe. The results of research across Europe can not be left inside laboratories and libraries. It has to be available to the citizens, young people and commerce of Europe. And the main source of information for all these groups is the mass media, yet large parts of European research do not allocate sufficient importance to media relations.

Because Europe's performance in disseminating its research results through the mass media is poor European and the world's media is largely dominated by North American research news. The current situation is untenable and calls for remedial action.

That European and the world's media do not adequately represent the significance of European research has been recognised since at least the 1990's, when several organisations and individuals began to point out that North American research's dominance of the media posed long-term dangers for European research. Without knowledge of the achievements and significance of European research, achieving the fundamental research communication objectives of supporting dialogue, motivation and wealth creation would be greatly hindered.

In 1997 the European Space Agency established a public relations task force to gauge the scale of the problem facing media coverage of Europe's space science research in the world's media and make recommendations to rectify the situation.

Also in 1997, pressure from the wider European high-energy physics community, led to the creation of the AlphaGalileo news service to provide a proactive single point of contact between the media and Europe's research community. AlphaGalileo demonstrated the effectiveness of an authoritative Internet-based service. However, by providing the first European focus for research media interactions it highlighted the need for many European research bodies to improve the effectiveness of their media services. The first assessment of the AlphaGalileo project⁴ included this comment:

“The editorial policy, technology and management issues [of operating AlphaGalileo] have proved to be less complex than expected. Instead it has become apparent that cultural issues pose the greatest threat to AlphaGalileo's ultimate aim. A communications system is not a substitute for news.

AlphaGalileo, April 1999

In 2001 the European Commission, in its Science and Society Action Plan⁵, recognised the success of the AlphaGalileo service, but suggested that further action to improve the interaction between research and media was still required.

“Public awareness Action 1 The Commission, in cooperation with the Member States, will set up a study group comprising journalists and representatives of the press in order to examine the best way of ensuring efficient dissemination of scientific information at European level, for example by promoting the establishment of a European scientific press agency or by facilitating the creation of a network for the exchange by professionals of information destined for the general public.

European Commission, December 2001

In 2002 the European Science Foundation convened a group of media and public relations professionals to consider the performance of European research public relations. Its report ‘Science Communication in Europe’ noted that:

“Although there are several trans-European initiatives, such as AlphaGalileo, European Science Week, Euroscience and a number of national and institutional programmes to promote science in the media, it is still at a very low level compared with the high importance that science communication is given in the USA. American universities and organisations such as NASA and NIFI have a very different culture of communication.”

Science Communication in Europe
European Science Foundation, March 2003

In 2003 Claus Madsen, of the European Southern Observatory in a study of national newspapers found that:

“[In the German national press]...the majority of the scientific results or claims reported on originate in the United States (67%). Only 14% of the articles cover scientific work by German scientists.”

‘Astronomy Communication’,
Heck and Madsen (Eds) Kluwer Academic Publishers

The European Commission’s European Research Advisory Board (EURAB) report on European university performance identified a major weakness in European university performance:

“... European universities are not at present globally competitive with those of our major partners...”

‘The role of the universities in the Europe of knowledge’,
European Commission, February 2003

How has this situation come about?

During the same period right across Europe there have been many initiatives to make researchers more media-friendly: training courses, exchanges between journalists and researchers, and awards for good communication work. Considerable efforts have also been made to support the development of research journalists who understand the principles of research and can provide the media with good research-based material.

For many of us involved in research public relations the answer is that these efforts have ignored the crucial role of media liaison staff. The press officers and information officers who day-by-day ensure that the work of their organisation gets accurate and appropriate coverage in the media. Existing efforts to rectify the situation have produced some advances, but by overlooking the significance of information staff, there remains a gulf between best practice, not just between the US research and European research, but between European arts, finance and political public relations and research. Consistent, planned and professional media relations is not yet a common characteristic of the European Research Area. There are good examples, including in Italy that done by Istituto Nazionale di Fisica Nucleare (INFN), but overall there are many areas where media work is given a low priority and the significance of media staff is not recognised.

We take it for granted that all other elements of our culture work closely with media relations staff. Pop-stars and politicians, industry and sports, they all make effective use of skilled media relations staff to ensure they get the media coverage they need to be elected or sell a million CDs. However when you look at research there is a different situation. In many parts of the European Research Area there are no media relations offices and in others an emphasis on communicating only with research peers has developed into a negative view of contact with the mass media. Where there are good information staff they are often starved of the resources to do their job to the best of their ability. Those resources do of course include funding, but they also include training and access to information. Media work does not operate in a vacuum. To do a good job of presenting research to the media the media relations staff have to have easy access to researchers and policy makers.

Comparisons of the importance of information offices in American organisations with European institutions are revealing. For example NASA media relations activity is not simply far better resourced in terms of staff and facilities, they also contribute to the development of not just NASA

communications policy, but provide advice on the impact of NASA policies in general. In comparison many European media offices are inadequately staffed and resourced and are excluded from policy decisions of any kind.

Although the difficulties are clear, there are many examples of good media communication within the European research community: as well as INFN in Italy, Max Planck–Gesellschaft and the University of Bonn in Germany, Imperial College in the UK, CNRS in France, the European Southern Observatory and European Space Agency amongst others. Both within the academic and commercial arenas, organisations have successfully communicated their activities – the challenge for Europe is to improve the scale of this success and share the knowledge that exists within the organisations that are good performers.

At the end of 2004 a group of 30 experts – researchers, media liaison staff and journalists – met in Brussels to review the problem, consider a series of solutions offered by AlphaGalileo Foundation and ascertain if there was a consensus on future actions and timings. The group confirmed that there was indeed a problem that required prompt action. It also recommended that any solution should not compete with existing initiatives of organisations.

The options that AlphaGalileo suggested were based on consultations undertaken by the Foundation with its user communities since the publication of the Commission’s Science and Society Action Plan in 2001.

The options were:

- **Option A: Research Media Broadcaster and Publisher.**

An organisation to create programmes and articles for use directly without editorial input by the world’s media. It would circulate news material in print form for use by non–specialist publishers and provide stock pictures and video. It would be staffed by media professionals – programme makers, reporters, photographers, etc.

- **Option B: Research Media Agency.**

An organisation as described in Option 1, but dealing only with print media. It would create articles for use directly without editorial input by the world’s media and circulate news material in print form for use by non–specialist publishers and provide stock pictures and video. It would be staffed by media professionals.

- **Option C: Research Media Service.**

An organisation to provide a support and training network for more effective media research interaction. It would provide a distribution and translation service for Europe’s research community, and where necessary create news releases, undertake media training and arrange media facilities. It would provide stock pictures and video. It would be staffed by public relations specialists.

- **Option D: Research Media Distribution Centre.**

The distribution centre option - essentially the service currently offered by AlphaGalileo Foundation. As a distribution service only, it does not have the structure or resources proactively to increase the volume or quality of, or add to the value of, the research news.

The group’s preferred option was for the establishment of a European research media service.

The objectives of a media service would be quantitative and qualitative: to ensure that significantly more European research news reaches the worldwide media, and that this news is covered more effectively. This would be achieved by increasing the flow of research news from all of Europe’s research facilities to the media. It would act as an enabler, providing access to existing best practice, training and technical infrastructure as required.

The service’s objectives would be:

- to promote to the research community the importance and benefits of communicating research news;
- to enhance the significance of the role of media liaison within the European research community;
- to secure the resources needed for effective media liaison work; and
- to improve the performance of media liaison staff by exchange of best practice and training.

The service would:

- lobby for wider recognition of the need for effective media relations;

- identify specific needs by country, cultural region or research discipline;
- exchange good practice across research themes and nations;
- organise training for media liaison staff;
- arrange for translation of local news releases into appropriate trans-national languages;
- create and implement media strategies – but only in exceptional situations; and
- produce briefing summaries of breaking news for governments, research policy makers and media liaison staff.

A basic principle of the service would be that there is no single solution to the problem that can be applied across the European Research Area. The needs of individual countries, research bodies and disciplines require a sensitive and targeted approach. The experts group recommended that the service should operate with a small coordinating hub, with most of its executive staff in-country. But in recognition of the work previously aimed at researchers and the media the group supported the continuation of efforts aimed at these equally important audiences. Getting more and better coverage of European research in the world's media has three partners. Communiqué is working towards getting recognition of all three players.

To pursue the objectives established by the experts' meeting AlphaGalileo Foundation created Communiqué in cooperation with the European Commission and a range of supporters including the British and Italian governments, European Science Foundation and Euroscience and European Union Science Journalists Association.

Communiqué is an inclusive vehicle to help progress the evaluation and subsequent creation of a European research media service. Communiqué seeks to work with all interested bodies and individuals to achieve the establishment of a programme to deliver the functions recommended for the media service. Communiqué is not the media service, but an impartial initiative to ensure that any media service that is created is relevant and practical.

Communiqué is keen to involve all areas of the European research community and all offers of assistance are welcome. It is to be expected that not everyone will agree with the initial findings of the experts' group and alternative suggestions and models are welcomed and encouraged.

If you would like to participate in the process please get in touch with us at: Communiqué, AlphaGalileo Foundation, Rue de la Presse 4 DrukpersstraatB, 1000 Bruxelles, Belgium or via the web site at <http://www.communique-initiative.org>.

Notes and references

¹ The Lisbon declaration set Europe the goal of becoming “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”. The Lisbon European Council: an agenda of economic and social renewal for Europe, March 2000

Author

Peter Green has worked in advertising and public relations for over 25 years. From the early 1970s he worked as a UK government publicity and press officer for scientific and technical departments. His final two government posts were as Head of Publishing and Publicity at the Natural Resources Institute, the UK's tropical agricultural research establishment, and Head of Information at the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council. Whilst at PPARC he created the AlphaGalileo research news service. He is now working with European colleagues on the Communiqué initiative to enhance the role and performance of the European research community's media liaison work. E-mail: peter.green@communique-initiative.org.