

Scientific Liaison and Information Services

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We live in the age of the 'spin doctor' and any group, however small and unrepresentative of the majority, with the inclination and the money to do so, can mount campaigns against governments, major corporations and even individuals, which can be misguided and malicious. Frequently, they have a large but unjustified impact. In doing this, these groups are sometimes supported vigorously by certain sectors of the media who either have cast themselves in the role of champion of the underdog, or who have had no idea of the science carried out but see a negative approach towards it as something which will curry favour with readers, listeners or viewers. In such circumstances, it is not uncommon for objectivity and scientifically proven facts to disappear totally. Happily, this is balanced by others in the media who are learned, well informed or both, and who now seek to give a much better balance to the portrayal of such areas of human endeavour as biotechnology and other advanced scientific developments. Nevertheless, it has become more and more necessary for scientists to allocate increasing amounts of their valuable time to explain and justify their work. Pressure groups often exploit the concept of public accountability and see no comparable need to explain and justify their objections. Genuine debate has been replaced by 'sound bites'.

Given that this is the way of things in the UK today, it is not surprising that my Unit, SLIS, is having to spend increasing amounts of time on improving 'public awareness of science'. In just my own activities, this takes many different forms, from explaining the Institute's research to biological science students, to giving public lectures (33), taking part in radio and television programmes (14 and 3 respectively) and press interviews (17). A number of Institute staff, including my immediate colleague, Tim Heilbronn, are similarly involved in these interactions with sections of the public and media. Other equally direct means of taking the Institute's work to the general public are used through participation in science festi-

vals, garden shows, *etc.*, by having our own Open Days, and hosting individual and groups of visitors. There is also a need to educate the educators and, to this end, we not only bring teachers to SCRI but go out to talk to staff in schools. Scientific and other publications are also vital for spreading knowledge of the Institute's work and the 222 refereed and 247 non-refereed papers and articles in the past year not only help to achieve this but provide ample evidence of the productivity and success of our scientists. Finally, there is the presentation of our science at the widest range of scientific conferences affordable, to ensure that our findings are given at first hand and not by someone whose knowledge of our work and its interpretation is distorted by a pre-determined agen-

da. Other avenues such as participation in the British Society of Plant Breeders Communications Working Party, are used increasingly to inform. A measure of this impact is the over 330 press references to SCRI's work during the year 2000.

There is no lack of public interest in SCRI, with over 1700 people attending our

Open Days, and well over 2600 in total visiting the Institute in the last year through arrangements made with SLIS. Additional numbers arrange visits directly with our scientists for discussion and consultation.

It is not enough simply to take out information to the various venues and assume that understanding will be automatic. A high quality of pictorial presentation is required and staff have had to acquire and use robust and 'easy to understand' presentational skills, especially where certain confrontational members of the media and general public are involved. On this latter point, media training by experienced television journalists has given senior staff both an awareness of the processes of TV and radio presentation, and the ability to make their case in a concise fashion. On the former, it is gratifying that our high standards of visual presentation have been recognised by the award of Silver Medals at both the National Garden Show for Scotland and the highly successful Dundee Flower



Show. Particular interest has been expressed in our displays on ladybirds, their benefits and their predators, and in our research on beneficial nutritional factors in crops, especially soft fruit. The latter was the Institute's principal display at this year's Edinburgh International Science Festival.

Politicians have not been slow to appreciate the importance of SCRI's research, and the Institute has been visited by representatives of all the major political parties at MP, MSP, MEP and local council levels. As a further aid to increasing awareness of the science carried out at SCRI and other publicly funded research organizations in Scotland, SEERAD has co-ordinated regular meetings of Information Officers from all the SABRI's, SAC and RBGE. These are used both to obtain information which can be presented concisely to politicians and other interested parties, and to extend further the presentation of the scientific achievements of these bodies to the general public through publications such as reSEARCH, the newsletter of the Agricultural and Biological Research Group of SEERAD.

Other specialist interests have been served through the organisation of various conferences. SLIS staff have played major roles in the organisation of conferences on 'Crop Protection in Northern Britain', on a 'Nitrogen Forum for Scotland' and the 8th International *Rubus* and *Ribes* Symposium, and continue to be involved in the planning for the XVIth Eucarpia Congress in Edinburgh.

There is an increasing need to give support for the commercialisation of research findings such as the Institute's recently developed diagnostic (jointly with Grampian University Hospitals Trust) for *E.coli* O157. The commercial potential of this work was recognised by an award from the Altran Foundation worth £600,000. Since then, there have been substantial media and commercial interests. Other public events such as the presentation of the Institute of Horticulture Norah Stucken Award to SCRI for achievements in soft fruit breeding at the IoH AGM in Edinburgh, provide opportunities to inform and explain.

As the demands on SLIS staff increase, greater efficiency gains have to be sought. The purchase of a Hewlett Packard 5000 colour printer allows the production of high quality, large format material such as exhibition display panels, to a size and clarity, and

reduced production time, than was possible previously. The ongoing development of digital cameras, together with the availability of suitable software for image manipulation, had reached a stage where a switch to this system of photography was justified. A Fuji SI professional digital camera, with the ability to produce high resolution images (6.3 megapixels), is now in use and capable of dealing with a wide range of subject material. Originally, a transition period of several years was planned, but the high quality of end product is such that, taken together with the reduced turn around times, the majority of staff now specify this technology. There is the further benefit that requests from the media for photographs of plants, equipment or members of staff can be met very quickly using electronic transfer of images.

The Library has continued to take on board the progression from the printed format to electronic delivery of information. Publishers and subscription agents are also wrestling with the new medium which has caused several crises leading to cessation of the delivery of electronic journal information, and a rise in price which bears no relation to ordinary inflation or, indeed, to the expenditure plans for the Institute. We remain concerned about the integrity of the archive and our continued access to it.

A large proportion of the Library services can now be delivered directly to the scientist's desk. However, it was necessary to undertake a major upgrade of the Library facilities. This will be completed in 2001 and will provide new shelves for journals and books, additional space and, so, better arrangement of the Library stock, and increased computer access, with four PC's available for use by SCRI staff.

The end-users in agriculture and horticulture continue to take a great interest in the Institute's research and, indeed, support aspects of it through their membership of SSCR (see also page 177). Information is disseminated through leaflets and an annual newsletter produced by SLIS, and Crop Walks for soft fruit and potatoes (the latter in conjunction with SAC and BPC) that attracted 80 and 350 visitors respectively in the year 2000.

The future is an interesting but challenging one, where new technology will have to be brought into play fully, to satisfy the many and varied demands on the Unit.