

Media resource service: Getting scientists and the media together

Programmes have been established to keep scientists and journalists in closer touch

by Fred Jerome

The Three Mile Island nuclear plant accident in 1979 led to the establishment of the Media Resource Service (MRS), which puts journalists in touch with scientists by telephone to help the press meet the public's need to understand science and technology. The Chernobyl nuclear power accident in 1986 underscored that need. The MRS is run by the Scientists' Institute for Public Information (SIPI), a non-profit group in the USA. Similar services have since been set up in Canada and the United Kingdom, and interest has been shown in many other countries.

At 12:45 p.m. Eastern Standard Time on 28 April 1986, CBS Evening News called the Media Resource Service in New York City for help on a story. The reporter said that a radioactive cloud had been discovered over Denmark and Sweden and there was a speculation that it might have been caused by some kind of accident at a Soviet nuclear power plant. She wanted to know if we could put her in touch with any experts on the location and design of Soviet plants.

By the end of that day, the MRS had received 35 media calls on Chernobyl, and the next day a record number of 60 journalists called (160 by the end of the week), all seeking experts to comment on the nuclear accident.

At that stage, of course, no official details on the accident itself had been released. But our MRS files of more than 25 000 scientists included experts who could and would comment on Soviet nuclear plants and compare them to those in the United States, as well as scientists who could comment on the danger, or lack of danger, from the radioactive plume heading towards the United States. Other media questions we helped with that week (and the following weeks) dealt with such topics as graphite fires, radiation effects on the food chain, and the impact of Chernobyl on the United States' nuclear industry.

The impact of major disasters

Something about a technological disaster glues us to our television sets and newspapers, desperately seeking every bit of information we can get. Perhaps it is the suddenness of it, perhaps the unexpectedness — this was not supposed to happen, the shuttle was supposed to fly, the nuclear plant was supposed to generate electricity — or perhaps it is the fact that we don't understand what went wrong. Or perhaps something else, something about the fallibility of man. Whatever it is, the impact of such disasters extends across all national borders, bringing us together, uniting the world in worry — and in the urgent need to know what happened, what's happening, and what is likely to happen.

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Certainly this was the case following the disaster at Chernobyl, as it was at the time of the space shuttle *Challenger* explosion and the Bhopal catastrophe. These calamities, in three different continents, each provoked immediate, heartfelt concern among people the world over — and provoked also a universal need for information.

And the role of the MRS in helping to provide public information through the mass media during those tension-filled but knowledge-starved days, suggests that such a service, or something similar, might be worth serious consideration in other countries, developing as well as developed. Before discussing that, however, it would be well to review the history of the MRS.

The establishment of the MRS

It was 7 years and 1 month before Chernobyl that the accident occurred at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in Pennsylvania. The near-panic that ensued among the public at that time, as journalists scrambled desperately for information about nuclear power, radiation, and a possible meltdown, convinced us at the Scientists' Institute for Public Information to set up the Media Resource Service. By the end of 1979, Walter Cronkite, then the USA's best-known and most-trusted television newsman, had agreed to serve as honorary chairman of the new programme, and the Ford Foundation had given a start-up grant of US \$75 000.

The rest, as they say, is history. Several "Wise Old Observers" predicted the project would never work. Journalists, they said, don't have the time or the interest to call a referral service for expert sources. Journalists, they said, are content to dash off half-baked, unchecked stories simply to make headlines. And scientists, they said, are too wrapped up in their work and too suspicious of the media to volunteer their time to talk to the press.

Despite these dire predictions, by the end of 1980 we had enlisted 5000 scientists in the MRS, and by mid-1981 calls had begun to come in from reporters at a rate of some 20 per week. Over the years those numbers have grown steadily. By June 1989, more than 25 000 scientists have returned questionnaires to the MRS indicating their areas of specialization and their qualifications, as well as their views on controversial subjects in their fields. (The MRS always refers experts with a diversity of views when a journalist's question involves a controversy.) In an average week, we now service more than 50 calls from the media.

Literally thousands of journalists have called the MRS in recent years, from small as well as large newspapers, specialized newsletters as well as major news magazines, and little, out-of-the-way radio stations as well as national television networks. Their questions have covered a diverse range of fields (*see tables*). In one recent week, for example, asked-about topics included arthritis research, possible health hazards from

Calls made to the Media Resource Service during 1988 and 1989 by media type

(in percentages)

Newspapers	42.8
Magazines	24.1
Television	14.3
Radio	2.5
Others	16.3
Local	58.7
National	37.6
Foreign	3.7
Non-science	70.4
Science	29.6

new cosmetics, a toxic chemical spill, the future of the United States space programme, the continuing spread of AIDS, and the use of robots in auto manufacturing.

The MRS cost, of course, has grown too — now some US \$500 000 annually. Indeed, perhaps the most significant sign of the programme's success is that media companies, from small independent newspapers to giant publishing chains, now contribute money to it. At the latest count, 54 media sponsors were contributing an average of US \$2000 each, providing 20% of the MRS budget. (The contributions are voluntary, and calls to the MRS are serviced whether or not the journalist works for a contributor.) The rest of the budget comes from foundations (60%) and non-media corporations (20%).

New plateau of significance

While the MRS has clearly emerged in recent years as a major, if not indeed the major, source of sources for journalists covering science and technology, in the past 18 months the programme has reached a new plateau of significance. This is thanks, if that word can be used, to the three major science-related disasters: Bhopal, the *Challenger* explosion, and Chernobyl.

Calls made to the Media Resource Service during 1988 and 1989 by category

(in percentages)

Health and medicine	35.8
Social science and psychology	15.1
Environmental issues	14.7
Child health and development	11.1
Life sciences	4.9
Energy	4.1
High technology	3.4
Military technology, national security	3.0
National disasters and weather	3.0
Agriculture	2.8
Others	2.1

Each of these disasters brought a record number of media calls to the MRS — 68 in the week after Bhopal, 97 during the week after the *Challenger* explosion, and, as mentioned earlier, 160 in the aftermath of Chernobyl. But it is not just a matter of numbers. The MRS role following these tragedies has demonstrated the value of, and the need for, a crisis-response centre for the media.

We can now identify several important differences — besides the increased number of calls — between a normal week for the MRS and a crisis-response week:

- During a crisis week, virtually all the calls to the MRS are about the crisis, while during a normal week, as mentioned, the calls run the gamut of topics from “soup to nuts”.
- While during a normal week, only 30% of the calls come from major media outlets — newspapers with more than 100 000 circulation and national TV networks — and 70% come from smaller, local media outlets; during a crisis week, those figures are reversed.
- During a normal week, only about 15% of MRS calls come from television outlets, but during a crisis week fully half are TV calls.
- In an average week, only 10–20% of the journalists calling the MRS require immediate (within 2 hours) referrals, while most don't need the names and phone numbers of scientists for at least half a day. But during a crisis, virtually all the callers need to talk to experts immediately.

These factors require adjustments in the normal operations of the MRS during crises, and have prompted us to develop an “emergency response” mode to meet the media's needs. They also underscored the importance of our having the top experts in our files, experts recruited primarily from the leading professional societies, research centres, government agencies, and universities around the country.

During times of crisis, the MRS becomes more than simply a “nice” programme lending a helping hand to journalists who need to check some facts or to find a few more experts to quote. Suddenly, the MRS becomes a crucial force in bringing information to an anxious or even semi-hysterical public. The TV producer, who calls at 3:30 p.m. to find an expert to go on the air at 5:00 p.m. to explain the possible dangers of radioactivity, doesn't have time to check around for alternatives. The responsibility of the MRS in such a situation is a heavy one — to refer responsible, non-hysterical, articulate experts. It is a crucial role at a critical time.

The enthusiastic expressions of thanks from journalists at major media outlets around the country who called the MRS during the Bhopal, *Challenger*, and Chernobyl crises demonstrate that we have done our job well. At the same time, we are working to prepare for possible future emergencies — ensuring that we can reach, and reach quickly, the top experts in toxicology, radiology, structural engineering, seismology, aviation

safety, military technology, etc.; identifying those experts who have television experience, and testing our rapid response system.

Unfortunately, disasters will occur. One of the prices we pay for advancing technology is the wider impact of technological failures. It may be fairly argued that it is a price well worth paying. But it behoves us to prepare as well as possible to provide a worried public with accurate, responsible — and fast — information during those crises.

International application

As more and more nations inevitably develop advanced scientific and technological capacities, the possibility of establishing programmes like the Media Resource Service would seem to warrant serious exploration.

Following the Chernobyl disaster, a *Deutsche Presse-Agentur* dispatch by Evelyn Bohne, datelined Hamburg, ran in the 9 May 1986 *San Francisco Chronicle*, under the headline: CONFUSION CREATES FALLOUT “HYSTERIA” IN WEST GERMANY. It read, in part:

“The Chernobyl nuclear disaster has unleashed ‘hysteria’ among West Germans, in the words of one top official, with streets deserted during rainfall and whole truck-loads of lettuce destroyed to escape an invisible poison hanging in the air ...

The background to the fear is a stream of conflicting advice from officials in Bonn, Hamburg, Mainz, and Hannover as to how the 60 million West Germans should deal with radioactivity in the air, rain, and soil. No other European country has been so shaken.”

In the same vein, an article in the *New York Times* of 14 May 1986, datelined Paris, began:

“France announced the formation of an inter-ministerial committee today to review information about the Soviet nuclear disaster. The government acted to help allay public concern over its belated disclosure that France suffered much higher doses of radioactivity than normal after the accident.”

These news accounts have a familiar ring. It was just such an atmosphere of public fear and confusion after the Three Mile Island accident in 1979 that led to the establishment of the MRS in the USA.

The idea of setting up MRS-type programmes in other countries is not new. Projects modelled on the United States MRS, in fact, have been established in Canada (in 1984) and in England (in 1985), and the Australian Academy of Science is seriously considering a similar operation.*

* The bilingual SIS (Science Information Sources or Sources d'Information Scientifique) set up by the Canadian Science Writers Association, is headquartered in the Ontario Science Center in Toronto. The English Media Resource Service, set up by the Ciba Foundation, is headquartered at the Foundation's offices in London.

In addition a number of journalists and scientists from the Federal Republic of Germany have visited our New York offices and indicated a desire to pursue such an undertaking.

In several developing countries, too, keen interest has been expressed. We have received a number of letters of inquiry from India, including one from K.S. Jayaraman, president of the Indian Science Writers Association. A delegation of scientists from the People's Republic of China recently spent half a day in our offices and left expressing enthusiastic interest. And Salah Galal, president of the Union of African Journalists, wrote last fall that "the Union of African Journalists could help in setting up an MRS at its headquarters in Cairo".

But perhaps the country where a media resource service is most likely to be set up next is the Philippines, where science writer Adlai Amor of the Press Foundation of Asia has written a detailed proposal for an MRS and is now seeking to raise US \$50 000 to underwrite the programme's first 3 years of operation.

Each nation, of course, has its own particular conditions to which any MRS-type operation would have to be adapted. (In the Philippines, for example, telephone service is not readily available in most places outside Manila, so Amor's proposal calls for utilization of other channels of communication, at least initially.) But the fundamental principle applies: as technology expands, so too does the need for public information.

To be sure, the vital role played by a media resource service is not limited to times of disaster or crisis. Far from it. Especially in developing nations, where new scientific and technological advances are in many respects the key to the future, public awareness and understanding of such advances can be critical. Indeed, in the past few years the state of the environment has become one of the most pressing issues of international concern to both the public and the media. In order to address these concerns and to help facilitate a better public understanding of environmental problems, the Scientists' Institute for Public Information has established the International Hot Line. This new service, an extension of the MRS, will put foreign journalists in contact with environmental experts from around the world. Journalists wishing to use the Hot Line can call collect in New York, USA, at 212-661-9110 or reach us via telefax at 212-599-6432.

The science scene is not always rosy, but on the whole, science and technology provide the engine for social and economic progress. Yet without accurate, reliable, and credible reporting, an uninformed public can easily become a sceptical, suspicious or even cynical public. An informed public, on the other hand, is an invaluable resource for any nation.

And in the modern world, an informed public depends upon an informed media.

