



## Two nations divided by a common purpose

Plans to replicate Britain's Science Media Centre in the United States are fraught with danger, warns Colin Macilwain.

Marks & Spencer. Oasis. Football (proper football) for the first hundred years. The list of great British ideas to fall flat on their faces in the United States is a lengthy one. It is a roll-call of infamy that sprang to mind last month, when plans emerged to establish a Science Media Centre in the United States.

The original Science Media Centre (SMC) began in London in 2002. It offers the media a clearing house for scientific briefings and packaged quotes from scientists. On its own terms, it has been an outstanding success. A combination of factors lies behind this impact: the energy of the centre's staff; the backing of sponsors, including scientific societies, major corporations and most governmental and non-governmental research funders; and a close-knit London media circle.

Science media centres similar, but not identical, to that in London already exist in locales as far apart as Australia, Canada and Japan. But it seems to me, as someone who has worked as a reporter and an editor on both sides of the Atlantic, that there are formidable obstacles to a successful introduction of the concept to the United States.

For a start, the 'problem' regarding science and the public is different in each place. The London SMC was set up because UK scientific leaders were upset that environmentalists had successfully fought the introduction of genetically modified food; they felt that the UK media were too susceptible to environmental scare stories about new technologies.

The main public-relations challenge facing science in the United States is different — bitter social and political division over stem-cell research, global warming, creationism and much else besides. A US Science Media Centre would either avoid these highly partisan issues — and face irrelevance — or step right into them, and take a level of heat that the UK SMC has never experienced.

Second, US journalists, justifiably or not, have higher self-regard than their British counterparts and are likely to take strong issue with the 'churnalism' aspects of the SMC. Under pressure as US reporters may be, they don't want to share 'pooled' quotes.

Third, the entire media picture in the United States is much larger and more diverse. There isn't the direct competition between titles that obliges the main London newspapers to run so many stories every day, in case readers miss something. Broadcasting dwarfs print media in its US reach, and is itself now being eclipsed by a plethora of new media — ranging in scope from an unread Tweet to *The Huffington Post* — as the principal source of news.

Supporters say that the US SMC would reflect this scale and diversity, doing most of its work

online. But it is hard to see how a digital SMC would differentiate itself from other interest groups.

Finally, the top echelons of the US media — what Newt Gingrich would call the 'liberal media elite' — are particularly sensitive to the nature of their sources of information. If an organization in Washington or New York, co-funded by government and big business, tried to sell them a line, they would recoil.

The London SMC's narrow approach to risk assessment — if you want to hear about the risks of nuclear power, say, just ask your local nuclear engineer (see *Nature* 471, 549; 2011) — sits happily with the prevalent ethos of British journalism. This was, of course, immortalized by the otherwise-obscure poet Humbert Wolfe: "You cannot hope | to bribe or twist, | thank God! the | British journalist. | But, seeing what | the man will do | unbribed, there's | no occasion to."

Despite the fears of the SMC founders, the British press — led by the BBC, which treats the Confederation of British Industry with the deference the Vatican gets in Rome — is overwhelmingly conservative and pro-business in its outlook. It is quite unperturbed by the fact that SMC sponsors include AstraZeneca, BP, Coca-Cola, L'Oreal, Monsanto, Syngenta (as well as Nature Publishing Group) but not a single environmental non-governmental organization (NGO) or trade union.

Fiona Fox, the SMC's director, says that the centre operates independently of its sponsors and points out that none (except its host, the Wellcome Trust) accounts individually for more than 5% of its income. She adds that no NGOs are involved because it was their public-relations

skills that the founders of the SMC sought to match. But the perception that the environmental group Friends of the Earth constitutes a bigger threat to scientific truth-telling than some of the corporate names on the SMC's sponsorship list is not one the US media would accept.

Some of those considering a US centre share these concerns. They think that their funding model will have to rely on charitable trusts, not companies or government agencies. And they see the US SMC as a source of background information and advice to help reporters to get out and do their jobs: talking to their own sources and obtaining their own quotes. That agenda would be less ambitious — and less fraught with danger.

This spring, reporters and funders in the United States will be consulted on whether the Science Media Centre can mimic the transatlantic success of a certain four-piece band from Liverpool. I fear, instead, that the fate of Robbie Williams awaits. Who, you ask? Well, exactly. ■

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