

Scientists must be free to communicate without politicians' spin | The Guardian

By Fiona Fox

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Twenty years ago, when I set up the Science Media Centre, researchers were notably absent from the nation's airwaves. Frenzies about Frankenstein foods, designer babies and MMR may have gripped the media but most scientists put their heads down and tried to avoid controversy. The price was the British public's rejection of GM technologies and levels of MMR vaccinations that dropped to a dangerous low.

Today, researchers recognise it is not enough just to do great science – they must also communicate its implications. As a result, the UK now gets most of its science news directly from the best researchers, translated by our outstanding science correspondents.

However, this rule has a key exception – which occurs when government press teams get involved. To my dismay, they are now exerting increasing control over UK science communication. Research may be done in universities and far-off research institutes but reports about this work are often taken up by civil servants because these projects are carried out at the government's behest or are funded indirectly by it. Examples range from research on TB and badgers to studies on Covid-19's prevalence.

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