Department of Meteorology approach to media engagement

Based on discussion at informal staff meeting 10th Nov 2011

Kathy Maskell/Richard Allan

1. **Summary**

The purpose of this document is to summarise the principles that guide the Department of Meteorology’s approach to media engagement. This is in response to concerns raised by the Press Office over our response to media enquiries and our media profile (both of the Department and the Walker Institute). Note that both the Department and Walker Institute received considerable media coverage (see Department and Walker Institute websites).

We acknowledge the importance of media engagement, but also recognise the risks and concerns of staff. To achieve effective media engagement and address these risks and concerns we will:

* encourage a culture of positive media engagement
* develop a large pool of staff who are trained and experienced in media engagement
* work with the University press office to provide support and procedures to deal effectively with media enquiries
1. **Guiding principles**
* We acknowledge the **importance of media engagement** - both pro-active and reactive
* We note a number of **risks/concerns**:
	+ - risks of being misquoted/misrepresented
		- dealing with media enquiries can be time consuming
		- climate scepticism/organisations deliberately trying to discredit science
		- sensitive/controversial issues which can be difficult/more risky to engage on
		- damage to personal/University reputation from a bad experience
		- pressure to respond to enquiries when not "qualified"/not area of expertise
		- media engagement must not compromise research/teaching
		- Press Office concerns over Department/Walker Institute media response/profile
* We note a number of important principles when **dealing with media enquiries**:
	+ - any media enquiry needs to get rapidly to the "right" person (relevant expertise, media trained and experienced, seniority - as appropriate for that enquiry)
		- the benefits/risks of each media enquiry need to be considered
		- the Department/Walker Institute may judge that we should not respond to some enquiries
1. **Developing a culture of active engagement with the media**

***Recognise importance of media engagement***

The Department recognises that media engagement plays an important role in maintaining a high external profile for our research, teaching and expertise. Competition, within the higher education sector and for research funding, is increasing the importance of external profile, outreach and marketing.

***Encourage and reward***

Our aim is to promote a culture that recognises the importance of involvement with the media, that encourages and rewards staff for media engagement and where media engagement and other outreach activities are seen as an integral part of a research career. We will develop a large pool of staff and PhD students within the Department who are both trained and experienced in media engagement. Staff with media experience will mentor and encourage less experienced staff and students.

It is recognized that mistakes will be made in some media activities and there is only limited control over stories covered by the media. Therefore it should be emphasised that while it is an aim that damage to reputation should be minimized, a no-blame culture should be adhered to with emphasis on limiting damage and reducing the risk of such incidents in the future.

***Acknowledge concerns and minimise risks***

While we recognise the benefits, media engagement also carries risks to reputation. There are individuals and groups actively trying to *discredit the science of climate change* – this increases the risks of media engagement in our particular area..

*Time constraints* are a substantial issue for academic members of staff since they are teaching, tutoring, generating income for the University through grant proposals, providing non-media outreach activities and leading work on Internationalization in addition to contributing and communicating world leading research. We can address this problem by actively increasing the number of trained staff available for dealing with requests and through resources to support staff (see below).

It is recognized that dealing with press requests can be both time-consuming and stressful, especially if the request is on a potentially sensitive topic and is outside the direct area of expertise of a staff member. There are also risks of being misquoted and having work misrepresented. We can minimise these risks through training and support (see below).

1. ***Media and communications training***

Media training is vital to improve the capability of staff to respond positively and more effectively to press requests. This has motivated the provision of media training courses by the Walker Institute (and also NCEO). It is also proposed that the Department include media training as a component of their graduate training programme for PhD students. Staff will be encouraged to gain media experience in less stressful/demanding media situations e.g., local radio.

In addition, staff and students will be encouraged to attend external training courses, seminars etc. For example, NERC offer a communications training course, the Science Media Centre run half day seminars on “Introduction to the news media”.

It is noted that the University CSTD courses no longer include media training. To encourage media engagement across the University, the University may wish to reinstate media training courses within the CSTD programme. The University might also consider including media/communications training as part of the new University wide graduate school.

Media training shouldn’t be seen as a one-off, “tick in the box”, it is something that should continue throughout research careers.

1. ***Support and procedures for media engagement***

***Dealing with enquiries***

We feel that pro-active media engagement is dealt with well (e.g., when we issue a press release). Responsive media enquiries can be more problematic to deal with, but are more likely to lead to coverage. When dealing with media enquiries it is important to get the journalist to the right expert as quickly as possible and for that expert to respond quickly

Each media enquiry needs to be assessed in order to judge: who is qualified to respond, whether we have had a positive experience previously with this journalist, benefits of engagement.

***Procedure***

An effective directory of expertise for the Department/Walker Institute should mean that the Press Office can deal directly with as many enquiries as possible. If the press office are unsure who to contact then they can ask Kathy Maskell (or Dawn Turner if Kathy not available). If neither Dawn nor Kathy available, then press office contact: Ross Reynolds or Pete Inness.

We will try to anticipate “weather” stories, for example if there has been unusually warm/cold weather. The Department weather/climate discussion (every Friday on term time) discusses current weather and climate. This could provide a capability to acquire useful statistics (e.g. warmest October since…)

Certain journalists and topics carry an increased risk of damage to the University, the department and individuals. There will consequently be occasions where refusing requests is deemed appropriate. A directory of journalists maintained by the press office would be useful – see below.

***Develop closer relationships with key journalists***

The Walker Institute has invited selected journalist to Reading to meet with staff (e.g., Damian Carrington, Guardian). This helps to gain media profile, to engender trust and understanding between scientists and journalists. This will be continued and built on.

***Directory of expertise***

To improve our ability to deal effectively with media enquiries (particularly responsive enquiries) and to minimise time we will update the Directory of Expertise for the Department/Walker Institute. This needs to be a directory of staff/students who are interested in media engagement and we will note level of media training/experience.

***Directory of journalists***

It would be very useful if the Press Office could maintain a central database/directory of past experiences with journalists (both positive and negative).

***Facililties/infrastructure***

Help from the University which could improve our ability to deal effectively with media enquiries (particularly responsive enquiries) and to minimise time:

* The installation of a radio link in Met building
* Use of Minghella building in training and broadcasting

***Measuring and monitoring our media profile***

A log of media coverage is maintained by the Department and by the Walker Institute. Help from the Press Office to provide a more objective, comprehensive and quantitative way to measure and monitor the profile of the University for weather and climate would be very useful.