

Citation for Fiona Fox OBE FMedSci – 27 November 2018

I am delighted to present Fiona Fox for admission as an Honorary Fellow of the Academy. Her determination and courage in supporting researchers to communicate some of the most controversial issues in science has changed the media landscape and driven the huge success of the Science Media Centre establishing it as the well-respected organisation that it is today.

Having graduated from the Polytechnic of Central London with a Bachelor's degree in Journalism in 1985, Fiona could not have predicted that her career path would lead her to become one of the UK's most prominent voices for the communication of science. Her first experience in media relations came with a London-based charity providing reproductive health advice to young people. Just days after starting this job, an MP proposed increasing the restrictions on abortion and the ensuing media storm unleashed by this comment set off an exciting six-month period which would see Fiona in the national spotlight - on TV and in the national news. In her own words – she “got the bug.”

From here, Fiona went on to work at the Equal Opportunities Commission, progressing to Senior Press Officer, and subsequently ran media operations at the National Council for One Parent Families. A complete change of environment followed as Fiona became the Head of Media at CAFOD – one of the UK's leading aid agencies and she went on to found the Jubilee 2000 press group which aimed to force serious international development issues onto media and political agendas.

By the late 1990's, Fiona was ready for a new challenge. She looked around to see what was making headlines and noticed that many came from controversy involving science. On the 10th August 1998, the UK woke up to headlines that GM potatoes were a danger to health after a toxicologist had told a television programme about his unpublished research showing that experimental GM potatoes (never intended for human consumption) could damage the immune system of rats. The British public were already highly sceptical of GM food and this situation aggravated matters, keeping GM crops in the headlines for the next two years. Scientists stayed quiet in hope that the furore would die down.

In 1999, the House of Lord's Select Committee on Science and Technology launched an investigation into the role of science in society and concluded that the culture of UK science needed to change in favour of more open and positive communication with the media. Three years later, the idea of the Science Media Centre was born. With no science background and all the odds against her, Fiona used the wisdom gleaned from years of experience as a front line press officer to apply to be the SMC's founding Director. After a grilling from eminent scientists -- including Phil Campbell, the editor of Nature, she got the job.

Once Fiona was in the driving seat, she was adamant that the Centre was not being set up only to help journalists, but to support more scientists to engage effectively with the media and her founding philosophy for the SMC reflected this, stating that “the media will do science better when scientists do the media better.” The main remit of the Centre was to help restore public trust in science by putting more researchers in the spotlight to

address the big, controversial stories hitting headlines and to improve the accuracy with which science was presented to the public. By persuading more scientists to talk to journalists, often at very short notice, the SMC made it much easier for journalists to give scientists a voice in the news stories of the day.

Getting scientists to engage in the most controversial and fast moving media debates was no easy task and the SMC was not initially universally popular with scientists who felt that SMC effort should focus at encouraging change within the media itself. Yet, the SMC has managed to win over the scientific community and science journalists and there is no doubt that science press coverage is less sensational and more accurate as a result. An editorial in Nature magazine in 2013 paid tribute to Fiona's "robust leadership".

In recent years the SMC work has expanded to include a greater focus on driving up the quality of the day to day reporting of new studies. This year the Centre has issued 340 separate 'round ups' in which leading scientists remind journalists of the caveats and context that should be included in reports of new claims. The centre is now running workshops in newsrooms urging general news editors to treat new findings with caution.

Scientists respect the SMC for enabling them to get their voices heard and journalists appreciate how this non-profit organisation provides independent, precise and authoritative analysis to meet media deadlines. Fiona has also managed to call scientists together on many highly debated science issues including vaccinations, CFS and statins as well as interspecies embryos and animals containing human material and her SMC model has spread around the world with franchises in Australia, New Zealand, Germany and Canada – all running independently but unified by the charter crafted by Fiona herself.

In 2011, a judicial public inquiry was carried out on the culture, practises and ethics of the British press following the News International phone-hacking scandal. Chaired by Lord Justice Leveson, a series of public hearings were held throughout 2011 and 2012 leading to the publication of a report which reviewed the general culture and made recommendations for the future. Fiona gave oral evidence to the Leveson inquiry, discussing a number of matters about which she felt extremely passionate – so much so that Lord Justice Leveson had to ask her to slow down on a number of occasions to enable the note taker to keep up with her. Following this inquiry, the SMC responded to a suggestion that the best scientists, science communicators and science journalists should come together to agree on a list of the basic ingredients of good science reporting. Taking this idea on board, Fiona led the development of 10 'best practise' guidelines for reporting science and health stories - which Lord Justice Leveson himself commended for their utility and succinctness.

In 2015 Fiona won the Understanding Animal Research 'special' award after coming up with the idea of a 'Declaration on Openness' to be signed by universities and research institutes which developed into the Concordat on Openness which has over 100 signatories. In recent years Fiona has built on the reputation of the SMC to take a step into lobbying. Not for particular outcomes in Science but against rules which threaten to become fresh barriers to scientists speaking out in the media. Fiona and the SMC have openly challenged new rules like the anti lobbying clause and during the last

election co-ordinated a joint letter sounding the alarm at the extension of purdah rules into researcher's daily lives. Asked why the SMC led on the purdah campaign Fiona said "I could not find anyone who supported the mission creep of purdah, but I also could not find anyone who felt it was their job to stop it." Earlier this year, Sue Grey, the head of Purdah in government called Fiona on her mobile to tell her that she had changed the purdah rules to allow academic researchers to operate business as usual.

The Academy has also benefitted from Fiona's knowledge and skills. She and the Science Media Centre contributed their knowledge of health communications to our influential 2017 report looking at how we can best use evidence to judge the benefits and harms of medicines and Fiona and the SMC have successfully taken forward a recommendation from the report to implement a new labelling system to help support accurate science reporting and assist journalists to navigate health press releases.

Fiona has also worked closely with the Academy to get more Fellow's voices heard in the media, and to communicate topical issues such as interspecies embryos and animals containing human materials. She has also supported the launch of multiple Academy reports at Science Media Centre press briefings.

Fiona's passion, drive and approachability and her uniqueness in offering a friendly ear and advice to press officers and scientists alike led to Fiona's award in the 2013 Queens Birthday Honours, of an OBE for 'Services to Science'. On acceptance of this national honour, Fiona said, "it was scientists who wanted to recognise me and the award is for my services to science. That feels good for a girl who didn't take a single science subject at O-level, but has fallen in love with the whole scientific enterprise."

I almost can't remember when Fiona Fox wasn't a fixture within the science landscape – and our world be a duller place without her. She has certainly ruined one or two of my evenings with a last minute request to appear on the Today programme the next morning at some ungodly hour. As I've reflected tonight, Fiona has a unique ability to bring people together and to build relationships at all levels. She has done a lot to facilitate better relationships between scientists and the media. (Not least at the rather legendary Science Media Centre Christmas parties!). Seriously, Fiona has brought these sometimes rather uncomfortable bedfellows together; ensuring scientists can speak to the media within the pressured timeframes needed. And in return, she has facilitated lengthier background briefings and visits to many labs to enable journalists to understand complex scientific issues but also to understand the way researchers work. Thanks to Fiona, the UK's science correspondents have access to scientists who are better communicators than perhaps they once were and ultimately the public benefits with more accurate information in their newspapers, on the airwaves or filling their Twitter feeds.

I mentioned 'courage' earlier. Fiona brings that in spades and long may she continue to push us to speak out on some often uncomfortable issues.

President, Fellows, colleagues and friends I commend Fiona Fox to you as an Honorary Fellow.