



## **UI INFORMATION SERVICE ACTIVITIES AND THE MEDIA**

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### **What is the Uranium Institute Information Service?**

The Uranium Institute is the international organisation for energy from nuclear fuel. Its membership is made up of companies from all over the world and all facets of the civil nuclear industry. Some of our members are devoted solely to nuclear; others have wider ranging interests.

The UI Information Service is based very much on the UI library in London. Enquiries can - and do - come from any interested party, from an 8-year old wanting information on the nuclear industry for a school project, to a request for technical data from a member company. We can provide all kinds of information on the nuclear energy and uranium industries, and on related topics ranging from energy and electricity supply to relevant environmental issues.

The media forms a major Information Service user group, even though the Information Service is not a press office. Why does the press come to us? We think there are a number of reasons.

Firstly, we are able to provide quick responses when necessary, but we can also give in depth responses and provide background information.

Secondly, although we are perceived as a pro-nuclear organisation, we are also seen to have a certain distance from individual companies in the industry. As mentioned earlier, our membership is international and comes from all parts of the nuclear industry. Naturally, members may have different business interests and views; some have business interests outside the nuclear and uranium industries. The UI is in the business of promoting its members' interests. This means that we must be able to see more than one side of an issue, without being biased for or against any individual company's views. For example, some members come from countries committed to reprocessing of spent fuel, but we also have members from countries that favour direct disposal. We have to be able to see both sides of the issue.

Thirdly, the UI Information Service works closely with UI Research Officers and has access to the expertise of its members, making a worldwide information network. Their support and assistance provide informed comment and back up.

## Key points to remember when addressing the media

At the UI, we have three key commandments which we try to follow when addressing the media:

- Be AVAILABLE.

The journalist can always use other information sources which may not be so unbiased or accurate, including anti-nuclear groups.

- Be PROMPT.

Unnecessary delays when an enquiry needs a quick reply could result in the journalist turning to less satisfactory sources, or even in publishing inaccurate information.

- GIVE EXTRA VALUE.

Giving extra information might introduce the journalist to a new angle or aspect, and could be persuasive in gaining constructive coverage.

## What does this mean?

Our experience of dealing with media enquiries has taught us some valuable lessons about how to put this into practice.

- Do not make assumptions on the level of knowledge of the subject. Make sure the necessary background is provided, without implying that the journalist is stupid! A well-informed journalist who understands the concepts and issues involved will be better able to produce a balanced, accurate piece of work.
- Always have a fall-back position for enquiries that you are unable to answer. It is better to suggest alternate sources than to send the journalist away empty-handed. Be able to say "I don't know, but I know someone who does".
- Be prepared. Be aware of what is going on in the world, and anticipate likely enquiries. Get the story straightened out as soon as possible, and have the facts at your fingertips.
- Get the story straight, both with colleagues and other organisations. Is everyone telling the same story?
- If necessary, designate a lead organisation to refer journalists to for comment. Don't tread on your friends' toes! It is worth remembering that suggesting people for the journalist to talk to can be a means of influencing media coverage. If a journalist wants comment on a news story, it is crucial to make sure that they get a pro-nuclear one! There will always be

someone at Greenpeace willing to go on the evening news and expound the anti-nuclear story. By suggesting other contacts, who we know are skilled at handling the media and hold the points of view we would like to hear, we can hope to get the other side of the story aired.

- Find out the journalist's angle on the story - what is he or she *really* after? Volunteer additional information beyond that requested. Suggest aspects that the journalist may not have considered.
- Be kind to stressed-out journalists. Remember that the journalist is under pressure and needs your help, so make it as easy as possible for him or her.

### Putting it into practice: Case studies

#### 1994 - Year of the plutonium smuggler?

In July and August 1994, the media went mad on plutonium smuggling. A few caches of various amounts of plutonium, or material claimed to be plutonium, were intercepted in Germany, and the international media were soon in hot pursuit of juicy nuclear stories. We realised straight away that, even though the smuggling stories had no connection with the civil nuclear industry, we would still receive enquiries about it. If handled well, the plutonium smuggling scares could show the civil nuclear industry in a positive light, as a responsible industry, committed to the safeguarding of its own nuclear material and opposed to nuclear proliferation. Insensitive handling of the situation by the civil industry could be harmful, though. If the division between the civil and military sectors, and the fact that the plutonium did not appear to originate from the civil nuclear power industry, were not made clear, we could easily end up with the widespread misconception that any terrorist group could break in to a nuclear power station and walk out with a do-it-yourself nuclear bomb kit.

How did we react? First of all, the Information Service prepared a set of notes which could be kept by the phone, ready to be referred to when enquiries came in. The notes summarised various points about the situation that should be made clear: that mostly small quantities of materials of uncertain origin had been intercepted; that military plutonium does not come under IAEA safeguards; that, even if a would-be proliferator succeeded in obtaining sufficient nuclear material to make a weapon, a lot of complex engineering would still be needed to make a nuclear device. Staff were instructed how to deal with press enquiries: do not try to pretend there is no problem - the evidence may be inconclusive, but to make out that nothing was amiss would just make the civil nuclear industry appear to be high-handed and short-sighted; make the point that the problem is military, not nuclear power-related; stress that the Uranium Institute is involved only with the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Finally, a list of appropriate people to refer the caller to, with telephone numbers, was included with the notes.

Did our measures have any effect? We think they did, although these are difficult to quantify. During August 1994, the Uranium Institute received 10 enquiries about

plutonium smuggling from British and foreign journalists representing television, radio, newspapers, journals and magazines. All the enquiries were answered with the help of the notes and guidelines prepared for UI staff by the Information Service. As far as British television coverage was concerned, all the contacts suggested by the UI were taken up and used, even appearing on television news bulletins! Was this a direct result of the Uranium Institute directing journalists to the "right" people? Who can say? We encouraged journalists to contact suitable spokespeople; had we not, the media coverage may have taken a different tone.

Interest in later plutonium smuggling stories was noticeably less, and some journalists asked the UI whether or not reported incidents were worth pursuing. This is one of our aims: to help journalists to identify when stories do not merit coverage.

### **A journalist is for life, not just for one story**

In the UK, a yearly advertising campaign declares 'A dog is for life, not just for Christmas', in an attempt to curb the number of unwanted pets that are abandoned every year. In much the same way, a journalist is for life, not just for one story. Building links with a journalist can be a very fruitful way of serving the interests of the nuclear industry.

For example, a BBC Radio producer contacted the Uranium Institute information service for some background information for a programme he was making about Chernobyl. Of course, the Information Service was happy to help with information and explanations. In the course of conversation, it became clear that the journalist was shocked to find that Chernobyl was still operational. The Information Service was able to explain to the journalist that, without nuclear power from Chernobyl, life in Ukraine would be very tough indeed. Perhaps this was an angle that the journalist had not appreciated before.

The programme was duly made and broadcast by the BBC in January 1993. Recordings of interviews with workers at the plant, local residents, Ukrainian officials and experts and the US ambassador to Kiev were included in the programme, with studio narration. The programme looked at operating and safety conditions at Chernobyl, health problems in the population, the effects of economic collapse and reform in Ukraine, and the nuclear weapons held in Ukraine, a legacy from the days of the USSR. The transcript of the broadcast reveals a programme that looked at the situation in and around Chernobyl without bias and without getting trapped in side issues or generalisations. The programme finished with the conclusion that, given the state of Ukraine's economy, the country had little choice but to keep the power station in operation.

A satisfactory result, then, with a fair presentation of a nuclear story which did not get carried away with emotive issues. However, that was not the end of the story. That radio producer still contacts us regularly for information, or just to find out if a story is worth pursuing. He trusts us to provide information and guidance.

## Conclusion

It would be very difficult to quantify the results from our media dealings without the input of vast amounts of time and money. Even then, the evaluation would be subjective, as one result of our media dealings would hopefully be to help journalists to realise when they don't actually have a story at all. However, one result we can identify is that some journalists are now using the UI Information Service regularly. Our next step will be to maintain the network of contacts that we are building up.

Media contact through the Information Service is an effective way for a small operation like the UI to achieve a positive impact on behalf of the nuclear industry. We may not actually be responsible for what gets printed in the papers or said on television, but we can at least do our best to ensure that those who are responsible are well informed, and give the nuclear industry fair coverage.

We see our activities with the media as a long-term investment. As journalists become better informed on the nuclear industry, we hope that they will develop a healthy scepticism when faced with sensational nuclear horror stories, and base their coverage on science fact rather than science fiction.