Communications/Media Policy Task Force Report

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All Scientists' Meeting

4 June 2021

Introduction

- Comms Office presented details of current media/communications policy at various division all-hands meetings in 2020
  - **https://directorate-docdb.fnal.gov/cgi-bin/RetrieveFile?docid=33**
  - Resulted in considerable discussion
- Concerns about the policy were raised with the SAC by numerous scientists
  - Seeming need for permission to talk to the media about any topic, including science not directly in Fermilab program and lived experience
  - Extent of applicability to non-employee users
- Invited A. Markovitz (then head of Comms) to a SAC meeting on August 17
  - Invited scientists who had raised concerns to this meeting for an opportunity to ask clarifying questions

Task force formation

- Following the SAC discussion, J. Lykken asked SAC chairs to convene a task force
  - Work with comms office to understand how to revise policy to address concerns
  - Obtained a nuanced understanding of DOE perspective
- Task force membership was finalized in October 2020
  - Dan Hooper (PPD/Theory)
  - Bo Jayatilaka (SCD/CMS, chair)
  - Gordan Krnjaic (PPD/Theory)
  - Don Lincoln (PPD/CMS)
  - Aria Soha (AD/PIP-II)
  - Tammy Walton (SCD/g-2)

Task force process

- Task force met with
  - Current and former communications office personnel (including current head)
  - DOE representation (Fermi site office personnel)
  - Scientists/staff who have been affected by the policy
- Task force reviewed
  - Current Fermilab communications policy
  - Comms policies of other national labs
- Considered constraints on communications policies
  - Formal DOE rules/restrictions
  - DOE communications practice
  - Laboratory/FRA restrictions

Findings

- **Report** with findings submitted to DIR, Comms, and SAC on 5/5/21
- Very few requirements/restrictions placed by DOE on **personnel** directly
  - Certain topics require advanced notification to DOE or direct response by DOE
- Considerable requirements placed on **Comms Office** to report all media interactions by personnel to DOE (particularly for “high visibility outlets”)
  - Policy’s requirement to notify Comms before virtually **any** media interaction seems to stem from needing to fulfill this requirement
- In practice, overly restrictive policy causes some personnel to ignore policy, resulting in:
  - **More work** for Comms, running counter to intended goal, while personnel ignoring policy have effectively no repercussion
  - **Inequity** in who chooses to follow policy strictly (less privileged/senior) vs ignore policy, resulting in more effective freedom for the latter

Findings (cont.)

- Media policy can put both the **lab and its scientists at a competitive disadvantage**
  - Media interactions/publicity can be essential in promoting ones research
  - Media personnel can opt to interact with university colleagues with less restrictions, placing Fermilab scientists at a competitive disadvantage
  - Policy can place Fermilab at a disadvantage in **attracting talent for our workforce**
    - Scientists who value less restriction in communication will make that a factor in job choice
- Restrictive policy alienates many personnel from taking part in media interactions
  - Emphasis on institutional reputation rather than scientific openness and communication furthers this alienation

Findings (cont.)

- DOE places few restrictions on personnel talking to the media as individuals
  - This includes as **subject-matter experts** on topics not directly related to laboratory operations/projects
    - Current policy dissuades lab scientists from this **vital component of science communication**
  - And includes discussing topics as a **private citizen**, including not at all related to scientific research
    - Lab employees may feel they **do not have the freedom to discuss their lived experiences with the public**

Recommendation (1/5)

The laboratory media policy should be rewritten and done so from a perspective of default openness. An inclusive list of topics that must require advance notification should be provided. A dynamic list can be maintained by Comms that is accessible to all laboratory employees to account for change at the DOE level.

Recommendation (2/5)

There should be no assumption that any communication by the scientific staff with the media is equivalent to an official statement by the laboratory. The laboratory should make it clear which topics require official comment (e.g., new results from a Fermilab experiment or ongoing projects) and thus must be coordinated by Comms. For all other media interactions, in particular when discussing one's own expertise, the policy should make it clear that employees are free to interact with the press so long as they do not attempt to speak on behalf of the laboratory, the DOE, or the federal government. In circumstances in which this might not be clear, a disclaimer should be made to this effect. Opinion or editorial pieces written by employees should require a disclaimer (e.g. “Opinions expressed in this article are solely of the author and do not reflect the position of Fermilab”) in lieu of seeking advanced approval by Comms.

Recommendation (3/5)

The laboratory media policy should be transparent regarding why communicating media interactions to Comms is preferred, including the importance of doing so even after the interview/media communication is complete.

Recommendation (4/5)

The media policy and Comms should emphasize and prioritize science communication as an important part of the laboratory's mission. This goal should not be regarded as being in conflict with efforts to manage the laboratory's image or reputation and instead should be viewed as an opportunity to enhance them.

Recommendation (5/5)

Aspects of the media policy that pertain to non-employee users of the lab and the situations in which they apply should be clearly indicated.

Summary and next steps

- Investigated the impact of the current communications/media policy on the lab's scientific staff
- Understood DOE and laboratory constraints on policy
  - Investigated policies of other national labs
- Presented five key recommendations to improve policy within existing constraints
- **Report** with findings presented to J. Lykken, J. Bucher, and SAC
  - Awaiting acknowledgement
- Task force members available to work with Comms on developing updated policy