

Engineering Times

Media Resource Service

Media Turns to Sci/Tech Experts For Aid in Writing Stories On Korean Jet Shooting, Other Issues

More Engineers Needed

By Kathryn W. Hickerson
Staff Writer

At first glance, the news of the Korean airliner downed by the U.S.S.R. would appear to be a political, rather than a science- or technology-related news story. Yet for three days following the incident, the New York-based Media Resource Service (MRS) was deluged with calls from journalists seeking engineers and other experts who could speak on the subject of military technology.

"They wanted to know about avionics, about how radar and tracking systems work, and about the state of the art of navigational systems," says Fred Jerome, director of MRS. "We had 17 calls in three days from a wide variety of major media outlets."

To Jerome, the incident exemplifies a new trend: an increasing interest on the part of the media to the applications of scientific research. In short, to engineering.

"We're realizing that we need many more engineers in our resource base," Jerome says. "We're now getting 40 calls a week from journalists, and an increasing number of them are asking questions related to engineering. Yet only a few hundred of the 13,000 experts in our files are engineers."

The resource base Jerome refers to is a computerized file of scientists and engineers who have agreed to answer media questions in their areas of expertise. Journalists who call a toll-free number at MRS are referred to several experts who can speak to various sides of the issue in question.

Military technology, says Jerome, is one of the biggest interests of the media these days. In fact, MRS is in the process of establishing a new advisory committee of military technology experts who can answer media questions or refer callers to appropriate people in this often-sensitive field. The committee, funded by a two-year, \$100,000 grant from the Ford Foundation, is chaired by James Woolsey, a member of the U.S. disarmament negotiating committee in Geneva.

Other media questions to MRS requiring engineering expertise have had to do with medical technology (including the use of computers in medical diagnosis and the use of electricity to heal broken bones); nuclear power plant safety; robotics; airplane safety; and the industrial and consumer applications of lasers.

When a media call is received, MRS searches its computer files for appropriate engineers or scientists who have indicated a willingness to speak on the subject. MRS then calls the experts to alert them that a media call is on the way.

"That call is the secret ingredient that makes the Media Resource Service work so well," says Jerome. "It's a way to double-check that an expert is available and willing to address a particular question. When they know a journalist will be calling, they are less likely to be defensive, and they have a chance to give some careful thought to their answer before talking to the reporter."

The system saves journalists time "because they know that the experts we refer will be available and expecting their calls," he adds.

No one who expresses an interest in registering with MRS is excluded from its files. "We believe that to set ourselves up as the authority on who qualifies as an expert would cause infinitely more problems than it might solve," Jerome explains.

However, the questionnaire filled out by each registering engineer or scientist lists professional affiliations; committees and boards on which the expert has served; and recent publications. Registrants usually send a complete resume and bibliography with their questionnaire, and MRS checks each name in the "Science Citation Index" to see how frequently his or her work has been cited by contemporaries. "In this way, we are able to provide journalists with a sense of a scientist's or engineer's standing within the professional community," says Jerome.

"We don't offer our opinion that such-and-such a scientist or engineer is top-notch, but simply inform the journalist that he or she is chairman of a department at a university, a member of the National Academy, heads a commission, has been cited frequently (or infrequently) in the professional literature during the past year, and so on."

On controversial issues, MRS seeks to provide journalists with engineers and scientists whose views represent all sides of the question. "We try to limit the referrals to any one person to three or four a year," notes Jerome.

His goal for the next year is to double the number of experts registered with MRS to 26,000. "We particularly need to increase the number of engineers," he says, noting that MRS currently is working with several professional engineering societies to enlist engineer experts.

NSPE members interested in being listed with MRS should contact the organization directly for further information and a questionnaire. Direct inquiries to Media Resource Service, Scientists' Institute for Public Information, 355 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017; (212) 661-9110.