British Geological Survey

Developing good media relations in the BGS

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BGS press office

For 155 years the British Geological Survey maintained a low and academic profile with the media. However, with the UK science funding regime demanding increased commercialism from the BGS, the decision was taken to launch a Press Office. The Press Officer was appointed in 1991 and charged with the task of developing the BGS's media relations.

The first step was to take the media's temperature and it proved to be very chilly indeed. The media seemed to regard geology as a low priority aspect of its environmental science coverage. The first priority was the issuing of news releases, bringing serious science to the general media in a light and digestible form. In addition, science editors, BGS staff and other interested individuals started receiving a monthly compilation of BGS news releases under the title *Earthnews*. Targeting and timing were major considerations, and slowly, over a period of months and years, the media began to accept, then request, news from the BGS.

The next step was corporate publication. Two magazines were launched, *Earthwise* for the UK market and *Earthworks* funded by the UK Department for International Development (formerly the Overseas Development Administration) for the developing world, in which English may not be the mother tongue.

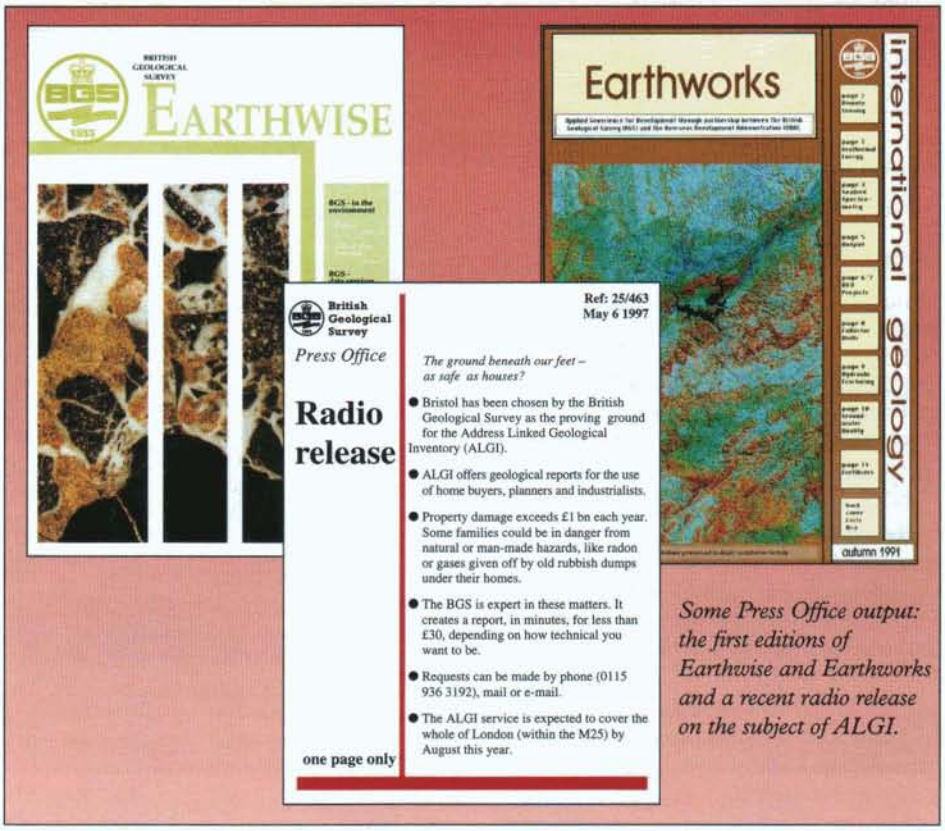
The development of radio releases followed. An early initiative of sending releases to local radio stations where small earthquakes occured, often unnoticed, was abandoned because of an excessive demand for interviews. Radio releases mainly concentrate on the regional mapping programme. Every time the BGS publishes a map or a memoir for a region, the local radio and television stations are briefed. This policy has proven to be mutually beneficial. Local farmers and other residents understand the need for the geologists' presence on their land and as a consequence the geologists encounter less hostility. In addition, the radio station is glad to be presented with lively stories, often studded with glaciers, volcanoes and dinosaurs.

The mainstay of the Press Office is the Media Liaison Officer training programme. After five years of raising the media profile of the BGS, the organisation now receives requests for articles and interviews every day. There are several regional offices and over 700 staff across the country. The BGS Press Office still has a staff of one but can now call on a network of media-aware scientists trained and willing to promote the two key roles of a Press Office:

- be accessible, cooperative, prompt and truthful with the media
- protect scientists from the consequences of misquotation.

It is the BGS policy to be open, welcoming and cooperative with the media, while respecting the integrity of the science. The Press Office exists to facilitate contact between the science and media, and to play a part in the public understanding of science.

By the end of the Press Office's first five years the BGS was achieving more than 20,000 column centimetres of press coverage per year, and 30 or 40 radio and television spots. However, further development of this important function in the BGS is essential.



Some Press Office output: the first editions of Earthwise and Earthworks and a recent radio release on the subject of ALGI.