# Working with News Media to Build Awareness of Biotechnology: Councils for Biotechnology Information in Brazil and Japan

**SUMMARY:** The news media plays a special role in building public awareness about many issues because it reaches the public every day with information about events around the world. In Brazil and Japan, Council for Biotechnology Information organisations connect members of the news media with interesting stories and independent sources to help them raise public awareness about agricultural biotechnology.

News reporters who cover agricultural biotechnology are tasked with gathering information about this complex topic from multiple sources, and interpreting it in a way that the general public will find understandable and interesting. They need stories that are relevant to broad audiences and experts who can clearly explain the science behind technology. In Brazil and Japan, not-for-profit Council for Biotechnology Information organisations help broaden the knowledge and experiences of journalists, who in turn build public awareness with their audiences.

## Working with news media in Brazil

In 2009 Brazil became the second largest grower of biotechnology crops in the world, with over 21 million hectares planted, and is also a major exporter of agricultural products. Agricultural biotechnology impacts farming, the environment, rural development, and economics and other sectors in Brazil, and member of the news media follow developments closely.

Established in Brazil in 2001, the Conselho de Informações sobre Biotecnologia (CIB, or Council for Biotechnology Information) serves as an important resource for stakeholders of all kinds, including journalists. The Council's strategy is to act as a bridge between science and society by providing science-based information about the safety and benefits of biotechnology, including addressing any potential concerns. They develop and disseminate factual materials on topics that are particularly relevant to Brazil, based on studies done in the country and elsewhere.

CIB places a high priority on providing information and support to journalists through frequent interaction with them, sometimes on daily basis. For example, when a new biotechnology product is approved by Brazil's regulatory agency, CIB immediately makes contact with relevant journalists and helps them get answers to any technical questions they may have. Ongoing outreach to journalists includes customised workshops in response to demands for specific information, periodic visits to newsrooms, and delivery of up-to-date materials on key topics.

A unique feature of CIB's outreach to the media is the use of independent experts, called Counselors. The Counselors are professionals in many different fields, including agriculture, medicine, pharmaceuticals, law, biology and nutrition. They work at major research centres, universities and other organisations around the country, but make themselves available to CIB to help educate journalists and others about biotechnology. Today CIB works with more than 70 Counselors, carefully selected based on their research activity, their areas of expertise and their ability to communicate.

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If a newspaper contacts CIB for a story about segregation of biotechnology grain, for example, CIB would provide some information but would also link the journalist to one of its Counselors. In this case, they might recommend that the journalist contact a Counselor who is a university researcher conducting a study on the potential costs and impacts of segregating biotech maize in Brazil. CIB would also work with the Counselor to summarise the results of his study in a way that the public can understand and share that information with journalists.

These initiatives and others in recent years have helped the Brazilian press to more easily access science-based information and interact with scientists directly. The journalists have passed this information to their audiences, raising awareness about the safety of biotechnology and its contributions to agriculture, environment, health and sustainable food production.

## Working with news media in Japan

On the other side of the world, Japan grows no commercial biotechnology crops but is one of the world's largest importers of commodity grain products, including those produced through biotechnology.

Like CIB in Brazil, the Council for Biotechnology Information-Japan (CBIJ) was created to provide science-based information about agricultural biotechnology to the public. Established in 2001, CBIJ places a high priority on reaching the news media because most people get their news and information about topics like biotechnology from newspapers and television. In Japan, more than 70 percent of adults read the newspapers every day.

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COUNCIL FOR BIOTECHNOLOGY INFORMATION JAPAN
遺伝子組み換え技術は、
暮らしに役立つ可能性を育てています。

CBIJ provides information to the media in Japan through an active programme that includes seminars where journalists can learn about a variety of topics. The topics for the media seminars are chosen based on the interests of journalists, as well as emerging issues. Seminars have been given on the status of agricultural biotechnology in other countries, as well as policy issues such as labelling, the Biosafety Protocol and biofuels. The seminars, which feature experts from government and academia, are also open to other stakeholders and may have up to 100 people in attendance.

Working according to the adage that "One time seeing is better than 100 times hearing," another popular CBIJ programme for journalists brings them to see


biotechnology crops growing in the field. This is a unique opportunity in Japan where biotechnology crops are not grown commercially. At a public research institute outside of Tokyo, journalists can see biotech corn and soybeans growing in a demonstration field next to conventional crops.

The seminars and field visits give journalists first-hand knowledge and experience with biotechnology and are supplemented on a regular basis with newsletters and direct visits from CBIJ staff. The goal is to have more factual and relevant media stories that the public can depend on to build their knowledge about agricultural biotechnology.

## Conclusion

Helping the news media acquire timely and science-based information about biotechnology supports public awareness and education about biotechnology at two levels. First, it helps journalists themselves to become more knowledgeable and comfortable about the technology by providing not only information resources, but direct access to scientists and field experiences as well. With this knowledge journalists can probe ever deeper to write insightful stories that raise awareness about biotechnology at a second level – with their readers, viewers and listeners in the broader public.

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