Media Communications Workshop: Dr. Peter Hackett

> January 24, 2008 – University of Calgary

> INTRODUCTION

Welcome everyone. It's good to have you here. I always look forward to seeing all of you. It's really the best part of my job.

Before we get started, I want to thank Grady Semmens, from here at the U of C. He does such great work getting the word out about the research stories on campus – and we are always trying to find reasons to work with him.

Thanks too to Todd Babiuk. Todd is the culture columnist for the Edmonton Journal, an author and a screenwriter. I hope he's not ghost writing down south, they're dying for good screenwriters right now. Todd and I have a lot in common. For example, we share a big interest in surfing movies.

Special thanks too, to Romie Christie from CBC Radio, Renata D'Aliesio from the Calgary Herald and Kevin Greene from CTV who are so accomplished at their work. You'll hear more about them and from them in a few minutes. We all have something to learn from each other about how we can contribute to the world around us by talking more about what we do and what we know.

So I want to tell you a bit about why I care so much about an open culture between research – and everyone. First of all, I've worked in science and around scientists for a long time; first in the lab as a chemical physicist, and then as the VP of research at the National Research Council in Ottawa, I worked guiding emerging technologies into commercial ventures, and on developing ways for Canada to share its knowledge-wealth with countries in the developing world. I'm also a grandfather - to Emma Mary, Christian Timothy and two-week old Aaron Stuart. I want to do this for them too.

This is an era of exponential innovation. Each new innovation builds on the previous one and the impact on society escalates every year. So we have no choice, we have to bring society into science and science into society.

I've met so many great people along the way and seen so many ideas breaking through. Through it all, most of this great work has been happening tucked away in research labs. So what have we lost by not getting the stories out there? Well, maybe we could have gotten ahead a bit faster, found it easier to find support for our research, been better at helping people make informed decisions about how technology will shape our world.

But that was then, and this is now. You're here, and you do have to work harder to get the word out about your work. The success of your research depends on it. And along with this great responsibility, you also have this amazing world of information at your fingertips. It's so easy to

share ideas now - you probably use wikis to learn about what your colleagues are up to – and if you don't, you should. If you want to know what you can do – check out this global community of genome hackers called iGEM – the International Genetically Engineered Machines alumni. They are part of a wave of innovation we call digital biology. These guys are doing things the new way, by communicating about their work – all the time.

So it's not really good enough anymore to just be really brilliant alone in your lab. A big part of the contributions you make will come from your ability to reach out – to other researchers, to supporters, funders, to industry and to your community – to kids. Don't forget to reach out to kids. What you gain in fresh perspectives will more than make up for what you invest.

But you pretty much already know that. That's why you're here; and because you know that, big things are happening. You can't really hold it back. Alberta is rich and we're going to stay rich – especially since we count your ingenuity as one of our greatest resources.

So this movement has started, but to keep it going we have to be part of a culture of innovation that permeates every corner of Alberta – a place where people understand and support science. An informed public will help us chart a path that reflects the needs of people's syndicated interests, accept products produced by an innovative economy, whether economic products, or new public policy, or just enriching new knowledge about our world and the way things work. Science really *has* been the transformative force in our society and we simply cannot make effective progress without a culture that understands and embraces science – a science culture.

And the public desperately wants to be informed about discovery on their own terms, in language they can understand and on the issues that they care about. A colleague of mine at the University of Lethbridge, Maggie Romuld, likes to put it this way:

> "I think there is a severe underestimation of the power of the public - waitress, rancher or accountant - to influence government policy and the support of research."

The media are essential to the process of developing an informed public. And the media like to find a hook – or at least two sides to every story. Access to information is everything. Think about this past year of public debate about climate change. You have Al Gore on one side and then you have the detractors. People responded to Gore's documentary with so much passion because someone actually took the time to explain the issues to them. So people are asking more questions – a great thing.

Now we know people want to be informed. And that breaking news can be confusing - I call this *Technoporn* because although it looks attractive, it is essentially non-productive.

Given how easily things get muddled, our role as translators of the special language around science can't be overstated. If we know something, we have to tell people. Even if it's just to say, "this is what the best evidence tells us…" People can live with best evidence, it's better than no evidence.

And look at the issues on the horizon. Water, everything about the environment and sustainable industry practices, health issues like food safety and DNA reprogramming that can bring forward biofuels or bring back smallpox, the 50 bit quantum computer that might be able to break public-key encryption.

These are the issues that everyday Albertan's need to hear about in language that they can understand. And these are the issues that you are uniquely qualified to speak about. Our hope is that you will ask lots of questions, start talking more about your work – to *anyone* who will listen - and use some of what you learn today to participate in the public conversations about progress.

Part of our lesson is going to be through Geoff Hay's example, a professor here on campus in the department of geography I said Professor, but really his role today is guinea pig. Geoff works in geoinformatics and landscape ecology research. He's one of our Ingenuity New Faculty scholars. We're really grateful to him for offering himself up – I said guinea pig, he says he's a lamb going to slaughter – brave man.

Geoff has the right idea about talking to other people about his research. He says one of the best things that happened to him last year was when someone pulled the fire alarm in his building on campus. He said that he met so many people he'd never have talked to – learned so much about new ideas and the potential of the work going on around him. Wouldn't it be good if we could find a way to have a symbolic pulling of the alarm more often – so people could talk more – share more.

Over to you Todd – let's get at it.