

Comment

Socially inclusive science communication

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ABSTRACT: *Social inclusion is an emerging preoccupation in the science communication field. The political value of science communication (e.g. in terms of empowerment) and the necessity to address all audiences has always been considered, but in recent times the participation agenda has enriched the rationale and methodologies of the communication of science: social inclusion is not only an issue of access to knowledge, but also of governance and co-production.*

The main topic of the 13th International Public Communication of Science and Technology Conference (PCST 2014) is *Science communication for social inclusion and political engagement*. In the 2014 ECSITE conference programme we can count at least seven sessions devoted to social inclusion. *Crossing the social inclusion and the science in society agendas* is the main claim of one of the first EUfunded Mobilisation and Mutual Learning programs, *SiS-Catalyst – Children as change agents for science in society*. These are but three of the many indicators showing how social inclusion is an emerging preoccupation in the science communication field.

The topic is obviously not new. The political value of science communication was explicit in many of the cornerstones of the history of our field, such as the foundation of Palais de la Découverte in Paris in 1937 (that, in the words of the opening speech by Jean Perrin, “will ensure the progressive liberation of all human beings and [...] the possibility to open to everyone the joy of art and thought”) or of the Exploratorium in San Francisco in 1969 (according to its founder Frank Oppenheimer, “if people feel they understand the world around them or, probably, even if they have the conviction that they could understand it if they wanted to, then and only then are they also able to feel that they can make a difference through their decisions and activities”), or more recently in the movement of the *éducation populaire* or in the reflections of the Open data and DIY/makers galaxies.

An old topic, then, that as such needs to be constantly renewed. What’s new today? What new knowledge can result from placing social inclusion and political engagement at the hearth of the science communication debate?

In this commentary we tried to collect diverse experiences and reflections that can help to expand the horizon of the possible links between science communication and social inclusion. They are but four of many smart, engaged, change-making initiatives that are

being promoted all over the world, which are all helping to think out of the box, and move beyond established understanding of what science communication is, can or should be.

By looking at these four examples, a series of considerations emerge.

- A first, crucial one is that the issue of social inclusion is not reducible to an issue of access. Exclusion mechanisms can operate also once a specific community has indeed been reached, through implicit messages that define who's welcome and who's not welcomed to a particular knowledge landscape. In fact, if science communication is surely part of the solution in democratizing access to knowledge, it does not mean that it is not also part of the problem, unintentionally reinforcing exclusion mechanisms by its language, role models, values priorities, etc... An increasing awareness of this aspect is essential if the science communication community wants to keep on innovating.
- A second point is that being inclusive means to include the diversity of the audiences in all phases of an initiative (whether it is a new TV program or a science museum), from design to governance to implementation. Once again, the key problem is not just reaching a community, but ensuring that such a community participates, sets the agenda, has a voice in science communication activities and that it contributes to defining the relevance of scientific knowledge in a specific context
- The examples reported in this commentary also show that the success of most activities linking science communication and social inclusion rely on the capacity to identify and interpret specific, local social changes, and including them in the science communication strategy, whether that is the relocation of a population living in deprived areas in an emerging country, or the urban and social changes induced by the recent economic crisis in the rich world.
- On the other hand, scientific knowledge can be in itself a tool for inclusion, via its crucial, ideal values – refusal of authoritarianism, objectivity, systematic doubt, sharing of knowledge, etc. – that can have a strong impact in situations where there has been a rupture of the social fabric, such as post-conflict areas. In this sense, socially inclusive science communication assumes an even larger scope: in fact, science communication can become a tool to foster social inclusion also beyond issues concerning science, and social inclusion can become a means to innovate science communication *in general*.

In their enlightening papers Claudia Aguirre, Emily Dawson, Leila Perie, Livio Ribolissasco, Claire Ribault, Heidrun Schulze, Barbara Streicher and Kathrin Unterleitner propose and weave together these and other considerations, that we hope will help us to keep social inclusion and political engagement at the heart of the values of science and science communication.

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