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Beyond the needs of science — can opennes and reflexivitiy push the polish science communication further?

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Abstract

The Polish science communication field has grown into a robust and diverse community. Centralised and governmentally funded initiatives are complemented by more bottom-up actions led by academia, researchers, journalists and educators. Still, the main goals of science communication in Poland seem to be a diffusion of scientific knowledge and building trust towards science and scientist. The concept of openness and reflexivity could help to include the needs and perspectives of non-scientific audiences into science communication practice in Poland.

Keywords

History of public communication of science; Popularization of science and technology; Science centres and museums

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Over 15 years of practice in a leading science centre in Poland, I had the privilege of observing how the science communication landscape changed in our country. It has evolved from a niche, free-time activity of a group of passionate scientists to the level of a governmentally funded, nationwide campaign. Polish citizens and politicians displayed a noticeable hunger for "more science" — in education, in cultural institutions, in media. Still, conceptually most of the work is done under the framework of science popularisation — a blend of science PR and education that puts the scientific community goals to the front. In this brief commentary I will outline a landscape of Polish science communication and voice my opinion that the concepts of *openness* and *reflexivity*, simple as they seem, may provide guidance to push science and society relations in Poland further.

The roots of science popularisation in Poland are usually traced to the creation of Warsaw Science Festival and Science Picnic, two events that have been organized since 1997 to this day [Fikus, 2016]. The popularity of those events led to the creation of major science education institutions such as the flagship, nationally-funded Copernicus Science Centre that opened in 2010.[1] Today Poland

[1] https://www.kopernik.org.pl/historia-kopernik.

has a growing network — consisting of 27 institutions of various sizes and organisational forms — of informal science engagement players, many of them united in the SPiN association.[2] It connects science centres and museums with another strong informal learning movement in Poland — Children Universities and Universities of Third Age [Fikus, 2016]. In recent years similar initiatives were noticed by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education (currently Ministry of Education and Science) that launched the SON programme (Społeczna Odpowiedzialność Nauki — Social Responsibility of Science) a funding scheme that supported access to informal science education and science popularisation in less connected towns and smaller communities in Poland.[3] Currently the programme is focused on equipping 30 cultural and educational institutions across Poland with hands-on exhibitions created by the Copernicus Science Centre by 2023.[4]

In parallel to this centralised trend many new science communication actors appeared in the picture, some of them initiated by academic communities — for example Polish iteration of March for Science movement.[5] The association "The Spokesmen of science"[6] was created in 2016 with the aim of building more robust relations between media and researchers. The rise of internet personalities communicating science also did not omit Poland as well as the growth of organisations focused on factchecking in internet media [Warwas, Dzimińska and Krzewińska, 2021]. Still citizen science, while visible in the Polish science engagement landscape, as well as other participatory learning strategies are in the minority. While very robust and diverse, the science communication community in Poland is focused on propagating scientific knowledge and building trust towards science and scientists [Warwas, Dzimińska and Krzewińska, 2021].

The openness and reflexivity modes explored by the RETHINK project could help find new science communication opportunities in Poland. Especially adopting more community-oriented approaches could yield interesting results. In my professional work we rarely investigated the actual needs of our multifaceted audiences, following what we and our scientific stakeholders deem important for people to know and to engage with.

One memorable opportunity I had to experience what openness could look like in science centre practice was reverting the amount of time in an event dedicated to experts' speaking or knowledge being presented to give space to participants' expression. In 2021 I ran an event called Reversed Science Cafe that took the well-known Science Cafe format and flipped it on its head. The topic and invited experts were focused on different views of GMO crops. But contrary to a typical science cafe, where first the expert speaks and then the audience ask questions, the situation was reverted. The experts came to the audience with questions and left room to formulate, discuss and voice their own opinions and even policy suggestions [Cieślińska, 2019]. Later this event became a flagship programme of the EU funded Sparks project and its methodology[7] was developed further and

[2] https://stowarzyszeniespin.pl/czlonkowie-3.
[3] https://naukadlaciebie.gov.pl/o-programie.
[4] https://www.kopernik.org.pl/projekty-dofinansowane/sowa.
[5] https://www.marszdlanauki.pl.
[6] https://rzecznicynauki.pl.
[7] https://www.ecsite.eu/activities-and-services/resources/sparks-toolkit.

successfully implemented in 29 EU countries.

With this intentionally simple practice example I wanted to show that even in a science communication landscape dominated by goals focused on the needs of academia and research, the use of openness and reflection can widen the discussion by including different perspectives and community needs into our practice.

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