Fail better

Reviewed Conference
PCST 2023 Conference
Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 11–14 April 2023

Reviewed by
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Abstract
This short text discusses PCST2023, held in Rotterdam in April 2023, and reflects on the event's connections with science communication research and practice as a whole.

Keywords
Professionalism, professional development and training in science communication; Science communication: theory and models; Social inclusion

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People mostly remember the food. That, at least, is my experience of conference attendance over the last decades: food and infrastructure (do the projectors work?) can make or break a conference, enabling or disrupting the conversations and intellectual engagement that are the ultimate aim, and leaving a lasting impression. So it is not insignificant to say that, at PCST2023, the food seemed to me to be excellent: regular, plentiful, (partly) vegetarian. Proper coffee eased the way into 8:30am plenaries, while generously provisioned drinks receptions gave an opportunity to chat with old and new colleagues. In the same way, it was a delight to be hosted at the De Doelen conference centre — to have a cloakroom, well-functioning technology, and large airy spaces in which to talk outside of the sessions. I even caught sight of a couple of people managing to nap: this, if nothing else, must signal that a conference is comfortable.

This comfort was mirrored, at least to me, in the atmosphere of the event. I have always found PCST to be different to many other academic events that I attend in its friendliness and in the generosity of interactions within it. At this conference, too, I hugely enjoyed the rich sharing of experiences of public engagement that we saw, for instance, in the plenary sessions 'The ethics of making decisions for communicating science in a diverse world' and 'Finding common ground from the science of science communication' (particularly accounts from Margaret Kaseje, Aleida Rueda, and Yael Barel Ben David). Parallel sessions offered not only

in-depth cases and analyses but a mode of engagement in which questions tended to be directed towards learning, interest, and support over critique or deconstruction. The final roundtable I attended (organised by Daniel Silva Luna) focused on emotions in science communication: in describing the affective landscape of PCST2023 I find myself talking of passion, enthusiasm, kindness, fun, interest, humility, and — again — generosity. (Scholars of emotion might quibble that these are emotions, not affects — but that is a topic for the roundtable, not this report.) My experience was of a rich tapestry of science communication practices and projects — from community-led science in the Scottish islands to science journalism training in South Africa — and reflections on these.

Despite its pleasures, this richness produces some practical problems. PCST2023 was a conference overflowing with sessions, talks, workshops, and other forms of input. With (often) 11 parallel sessions, and some talks limited to 5 minutes, it could feel challenging to navigate the programme, and to substantively engage with what was presented. This is a longstanding issue, and I wonder if it requires some comprehensive rethinking of what a conference could be. Might we convert shorter presentation formats to posters, and integrate engagement with these into social receptions? How might we layer video presentations and digital spaces into the main conference (as indeed has already begun, through the virtual conference that took place the week before the in-person event)? How might PCST's local symposia be used as complementary spaces to relieve some of the pressure on the global event? Ultimately the question is how we might creatively re-imagine conference formats to allow for in-depth and productive interactions. How might we be as experimental with the idea of a conference as we are with our science communication?

Richness can also be read as fragmentation. Conference participants come from diverse fields, backgrounds, situations, and perspectives: PCST is interdisciplinary, international, and inter-sectoral. This, of course, is one of its strengths, and one of the joys of participating in it, but my experience was also that this diversity sometimes included profoundly different assumptions concerning the nature and purpose of science communication. Again, this is an advantage of the meeting — it is always valuable to engage with those who think differently about our objects of practice or study — but one that became challenging when such differences were left invisible or unacknowledged. At times, I felt that unrecognised differences made it hard to have coherent conversations. One central line along which discussion continues to fragment is well captured by a comment made by Jahnavi Phalkey in her keynote talk, about the extent to which science communication should be understood as a service oriented to trust creation. Is the aim of public communication to increase trust in science, or to do something else — to allow for critical interrogation of science, for instance, or to help science to become more trustworthy? My impression is that conference participants would answer this question very differently (indeed, one of the questions directed to Dr. Phalkey exactly concerned how to deal with the 'problem' of public distrust). Until we acknowledge these differences, and that we may have very different imaginations of science communication, it seems likely that we will continue talking at cross purposes, and that our interactions will not be as fruitful as they might be.

I noticed something similar with regard to the scholarly traditions that are mobilised within PCST research. While speakers come from very different fields,

one over-riding impression from conference presentations was of minimal engagement with, and acknowledgement of, the distinctive disciplinary histories, paradigms, and theories that are at play. Much of what was presented was atheoretical (in the sense of lacking explicit reflection on underpinning theoretical assumptions), while the one session that explicitly featured papers on 'Science communication theory' — heroically chaired by Emma Weitkamp — was so diverse that it was hard to hold a conversation: while each paper was interesting in its own right, it was difficult to connect them or to engage with shared conceptual questions. Superficiality in engagement with theory may or may not be a problem for individual studies, papers, practitioners, or scholars (many would argue not), but I think it raises important questions for us — those who attend PCST meetings — as a community more generally. It relates to the question of whether science communication should be framed as a single field or discipline (if so, it certainly requires a shared set of questions and approaches, even if we wish to frame it as a coherent interdisciplinary space [Trench & Bucchi, 2010]). Perhaps more importantly, it suggests that we may be missing out on valuable resources that could help develop our research and practice. What could we gain from more systematically acknowledging and engaging with, for instance, anthropology, queer theory, political science, critical race theory, or post-, anti- and de-colonial thought?

The value of the latter contributions is particularly clear in the light of — let us be honest — science communication's continuing failure to foreground and support voices from the South, from marginalised and racialised communities in the North, and from LGBTIQA+ individuals and groups [Callwood, Weiss, Hendricks & Taylor, 2022; Dawson, 2018; Mahmoudi et al., 2022; Roberson & Orthia, 2021]. PCST2023's explicit efforts towards increasing diversity should be applauded: notably, it was very much a women-led event, with women taking centre stage as keynote speakers and much discussion of women as important actors both in science communication efforts and in local communities. But I think we must recognise that attempts to foreground colleagues from the Global South, for instance in plenary sessions, were at times exoticising, paternalistic, and disrespectful. To once again quote Jahnavi Phalkey, "diversity for the sake of diversity is not enough". If we are to speak of equity and inclusion we must do better at centering, at starting with, the expertise of those in the majority world or in marginalised groups, and at allowing them to set the agenda for our meetings and discussions, just as we must do better at recognising the ways in which those of us with particular forms of privilege reproduce, knowingly or not, the structures that maintain this. (I include myself in this: as a white woman from the North, I am sure that my behaviours, however unknowingly, are at times are experienced as marginalising or as involving microaggressions. I am trying to better recognise my privilege and my biases, and to take on the responsibility and labour of educating myself, unlearning racism, and trying to support genuine diversity in the communities of which I am part.) Urgent questions for future events are thus of how to move questions of equity beyond diversity and 'inclusion' [Dunbar-Hester, 2020], how to allow discussions to be led by the voices, expertise, and priorities of those from outside of dominant groups (whilst simultaneously *not* putting the sole burden of anti-racism and equity work on these people), and how to defeat white fragility [DiAngelo, 2016], in the sense of being able to have difficult and uncomfortable conversations about power.

In this respect — and as a final reflection on my impressions of PCST2023 — perhaps we should be more angry. Despite the many joyful experiences I had at the conference, and the value of enthusiasm and passion, what I think will stay with me longest are the conversations and discussions I experienced that were marked by frustration and anger. "Science has a history of oppression", as one attendee of the roundtable 'Queering science communication' (chaired by Clare Wilkinson and organised by Lindy A. Orthia and Tara Roberson) said — oppression of queer bodies (in the context of the roundtable), but also of women, of racialised people, of colonised nations, of those with disabilities [Seth, 2009]. This is something we should be angry about, and acknowledge when we talk about science, as are the continuing ways that scientific research reproduces colonial practices of exploitation [Birhane, 2019], continues to exclude those who do not reside in white cishet male bodies [Prescod-Weinstein, 2020], and shores up market capitalism that reinforces wealth divides [Thorpe & Gregory, 2010]. The most engaging coffee break conversations I had featured things that were explicitly *not* being talked about in conference sessions: the relation between science and the military; research's role in bringing about wealth inequality; (neo)colonialism in science and science communication. Notwithstanding appeals to embrace discomfort — for instance in Jon Chases's wonderful rap that kicked off the first full day of the conference — and Ulrike Felt's call to acknowledge the value of disagreement in her keynote, it seemed to me that we are, perhaps unsurprisingly, not especially eager to actually have uncomfortable encounters, express negative emotions, or disagree with one another. In learning to do so we might take inspiration from an art piece close to the conference venue which featured a quote from Samuel Beckett as a 'shimmer' in canal water:[1] "No Matter — Try Again — Fail Again — Fail Better".[2]

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[1] Pictures are available here: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:No_Matter._Try_Again._Fail_Again._Fail_Better.jpg.

[2] Having googled this quote I have discovered (https://medium.com/illumination/fail-again-fail-better-c1f5e5eb8bf7) that, in context, it is exactly *not* motivational or encouraging, but rather concerned with the inevitability of failure and with the lack of any kind of narrative of transformation or hope. In the context of this conference report I will leave the reader to take what they wish from it.

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