

Through the 'queering' glass: looking at science communication from a queer lens

Reviewed Book

ORTHIA, L. A. AND ROBERSON, T. (EDS.) (2023).
QUEERING SCIENCE COMMUNICATION: REPRESENTATIONS, THEORY,
AND PRACTICE.
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Reviewed by

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Abstract

'Queering Science Communication' offers a kaleidoscopic collection of queer insights that both inform and question the field of science communication. Edited by Lindy A. Orthia and Tara Roberson, the book covers a diverse range of topics including LGBTQIA+ representation in science and science communication; examples of science engagement interventions designed for queer audiences; the positive and negative impacts of science (communication) on queer lives; as well as ways of queering the practice, research and teaching of science communication. Despite adopting a predominantly queer lens, this book offers various learnings for engaging a broader spectrum of marginalised identities and for eventually moving towards a more inclusive, pluralistic and reflexive science communication field.

Keywords

Queer(ing) science communication; LGBTQIA+ issues in science communication; Diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in science communication

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Queering Science Communication: Representations, Theory, and Practice offers an eye-opening compilation of insights, critiques and provocations for science communication from a dedicated lens of LGBTQIA+ issues, experiences and knowledge. Despite a rich repository of established work in fields like gender studies and queer theory, research at the intersection of these fields with science communication is fairly limited. As editors, Lindy A. Orthia and Tara Roberson do a wonderful job of addressing this gap by assembling a globally diverse and intersectional list of contributors to share a wealth of multidisciplinary queer insights for science communication.

The book begins with some important context-setting about why this book was necessary (and long overdue), a summary of terminologies and queer sensitivities to be mindful of, and a handy guide to navigating the book. It provides some examples of how science (communication) has historically been weaponised to advance anti-LGBTQIA+ agendas and inflict violence on queer communities (see for instance, Chapters 1, 2 and 4), as well as how queer communities have resisted these attacks. The book also underscores the need for critically introspecting how our field has been complicit in propagating *'the myth of an idealized heteronormality'* (Chapter 2). It not only advocates for the inclusion of queer identities within our field but also highlights how *'queerness interacts with other identities to create experiences of inclusion or exclusion in science communication'* (Chapter 7). The Practice Spotlight on 'Rainbow Spectrums...' provides a moving account of how offering intersectional visibility to scientists who are both queer and disabled can be incredibly powerful, while Chapter 6 describes how social aspects of gender identity and expression, sexuality, religion, and (post)coloniality intersect in specific ways to create unique challenges for queer Filipino scientists and science communicators.

In parallel, the book also highlights various examples of how science communication can be used as a tool for advancing queer rights and recognition (see for instance, the *'trans technology'* described in Chapter 3), and how queer science events can be reinterpreted in more creative and radical ways (see for instance, the Practice Spotlights describing the GENDERS exhibit, Endosymbiotic Love Calendar, LGBTQ+ Natural History Tour, and Science is a Drag shows). Specifically, the Practice Spotlight on Science Gallery International provides a great example of what queer-inclusive leadership in science communication can look like and some of the emergent benefits of bringing queer voices and perspectives within an organisation from the margins into the mainstream.

A core theme that echoes across several contributions in the book is the need for better acknowledging the epistemic authority of queer experiences, expertise, and agendas within both science and science communication, especially for issues directly impacting LGBTQIA+ communities. For instance, Chapter 1 reiterates the need for more *'queer voices to re-imagine popular constructions of queerness in public clinical discourse'*, while the Practice Spotlight on 'Gender and Sex in Research Communications' serves as a stark reminder for trusting trans and intersex communities' own expertise on their lives.

Another theme repeatedly reaffirmed by the book is the power of communities and their crucial role in providing structure, support and agency to its queer denizens. For instance, Chapter 7 describes the importance of *'chosen family'* and *'belonging'*; the Practice Spotlight on '500 Queer Scientists' illustrates how *'queer stories generate more queer stories and so community is built'*; while Chapter 8 highlights how *'shared interests, values, beliefs, and worldviews'* are crucial for instilling a sense of community in queer citizen science volunteers.

The structuring of the book also deserves a special mention for translating many of its own learnings into practice and employing a queer(er) approach to pedagogy. The book carefully curates and intersperses more evidence-based research chapters with more experience-based practice spotlights, and this greatly enhances (rather than subtracts from) its overall rigour, relevance and impact. The addition of

teaching notes after every section helps distil key queer science communication learnings, while also listing actionable ways in which readers can *queer* their science communication activities, audiences and agendas more directly.

Overall, the book serves as a great example for not only integrating insights across the continuum of research, practice and teaching in science communication, but also for employing a critical Science and Technology Studies (STS) lens for reflecting on our field's assumptions, practices and historical frameworks. For instance, Chapter 4 proposes shifting the focus of museums from *'thinking about care of the collection'* towards being *'caring and careful spaces'* instead. Similarly, Chapter 9 reiterates why in addition to *'raising the visibility of queer science and queer scientists'*, we also need to reciprocally *'highlight science as an underrepresented part of queer culture'*.

Personally, one of the most striking realisations from the book is Chapter 10's exposition of how most *'science communication is structured around a series of binaries'* such as *'expert/lay, scientist/non-scientist, knowledgeable/ignorant'*, and how our teaching approaches have continued propagating these binaries uncritically. Chapter 11 particularly hits the nail on its head by challenging such a *'science/public binary'* and instead pushing us to rethink our notions of expertise, question *'Western institutionalized science's claim that it is the gold standard of authority'*, and recognize that *'all knowledge systems have limits as all [of them] are culturally informed, shaped, and biased'*.

It is important to highlight here that although the book predominantly focuses on LGBTQIA+ issues, experiences and audiences, it offers numerous learnings for engaging a broader spectrum of intersectional and marginalised identities. It also encapsulates many dimensions of critically reflecting on the field that science communication practitioners, researchers and educators can each benefit from uniquely. Moreover, the book does not shy away from acknowledging the gaps in its own approach and leaves ample room for future reflections, interrogations and work to expand on (see for instance, the set of reflexive questions posed on page 188 of Chapter 10 for some inspiration). The book, therefore, makes an important and urgent contribution to the field of science communication by not only mainstreaming queer experiences, expertise and contexts within the field but also providing valuable frameworks, reflexive tools and a critical lens for introspecting the field itself.

Ultimately, Orthia and Roberson's latest offering represents a metaphorical colouring book of inclusive science communication. On one hand, it beckons us to fill these gaps with kaleidoscopic hues of queer experience, insights and knowledge to reveal more colourful and pluralistic outputs. But on the other hand, it also encourages us to question, *'queer'* and play with the rules of colouring itself to reveal entirely new, unexpected and multidimensional outcomes.

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