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Communicating science across different cultures — a reflection on the PCST Suzhou Symposium 2024

Reviewed Conference

PCST Suzhou Symposium 2024
Communicating Science across Cultures: Approaches, Perspectives and Challenges
Suzhou, China
17–19 October 2024

Reviewed by

Michel Claessens

Abstract

The symposium occurred from 17–19 October 2024 in Suzhou, China, a city famous for its long history and rich culture and often called “the heaven on Earth”. The 230 delegates from 26 countries spent two insightful days immersed in the world of science communication. The event highlighted that Chinese policymakers and research leaders are taking science communication and science literacy seriously. In his opening speech, Professor Yanhao Xu, Vice Chairman of the National Education, Science, Health and Sports Committee, recalled that China has a special law on science popularisation that recognises science communication as of equal importance to technological innovation. This also means that suitable communication activities must accompany every major Chinese scientific initiative.

Keywords

History of public communication of science; Popularization of science and technology

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This regional symposium was co-organised by Soochow University and the University of Science and Technology of China, with several members of the global PCST (Public Communication of Science and Technology) Network serving on the scientific committee, and with Professor Guoyan Wang, Director of the Research Center for Science Communication at Soochow University, as the conference chair.

In her opening remarks, Professor Sook-kyoung Cho, president of the PCST Network, highlighted the fact that 20 years after the first regional PCST event organised in Beijing, PCST is back in China with this 2024 symposium and a forthcoming conference that will take place in Shanghai in 2027.

Bernard Schiele, professor at the Université de Montréal and a co-founder of the PCST Network, told the audience that launching the network had been a major achievement from his professional and personal point of view: "This experience had opened my mind, he said, showing the diversity of people and views and I wish every member can learn from the network how different cultures are communicating science". The PCST Network has been promoting science communication globally through some 25 events worldwide since 1989.

In a keynote speech entitled *Uncertainty and trust in science: How can we deal with them in education and communication*, Jinwoong Song, professor at the Seoul National University, addressed an important issue that explained, at least in part, the current distrust in science we can feel everywhere. He showed brilliantly that communicating science and communicating research are two different things, although for the public, they are probably the same. The first is taught in schools, while the latter appears mostly in the media. But communicating research is communicating about a process — "science in the making" — which introduces uncertainty. It is, therefore, natural that the public asks the question: why should we trust science if it is uncertain? That was also the message of Professor Janet Z. Yang from the University at Buffalo; she explained that Americans are increasingly opposed to vaccination because they consider that side effects are either underestimated or hidden. This was particularly clear with COVID-19, where vaccines have been commercialised very quickly, too quickly, they believe, to identify all the side effects.

Jennifer Metcalfe, former PCST president, reflected on the evolving role of science communicators. She told the audience that they are no longer just explaining science to the public but helping scientists and engineers understand society. She stressed that some science communicators are building bridges between communities and, therefore, acting as "cultural mediators".

1. Symposium website: http://pcstsuzhou.org/.

The speeches and presentations addressed a diverse range of topics and were presented by researchers from scientific disciplines such as philosophy, science and technology studies, risk communication, policy studies, science education, and sociology. Several sessions addressed the issue of cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary science communication, and connections between science communication research and practice, which is the essence of the PCST network.

"The event was very interesting for young participants like me", Qianwen Wu, from the Beijing Science Center, told me. "It allowed us to see various perspectives, Chinese and international-wise. And PCST events are unique in mixing researchers and practitioners in science communication".

Overall, it was an enriching event that brought together pioneers, leaders and upcoming members of the PCST community and gave a snapshot of ongoing initiatives and upcoming challenges. The organisation was near perfect (but AI translators can still make progress…), although we could also feel that all major initiatives in China are subject to political constraints. One slightly negative note: many participants wished the event could be a bit longer to avoid too many sessions running in parallel (but this is a frustration we can feel in many events today).

The symposium highlighted differences in how science is communicated in China compared to other parts of the world. First, the scholars and professionals still refer to "science popularisation", although they stressed that this expression means in Chinese that they give high importance to the objective of reaching the people. However, concepts like citizen science and public dialogue are newly emerging in China, which means there is still a gap from a science "communication" point of view.

As with most scientific events, networking and personal exchanges were as important as the formal content. The symposium allowed visitors to experience a taste of the fascinating Chinese culture and gastronomy and discover the beautiful (and huge) so-called gardens of the humble administrators in Suzhou. As Professor Martin Bauer from the London School of Economics said: "We have seen many different sauces to put on our noodles and rice here. Metaphorically, I would like to say that science communication needs new sauces and new ingredients".

About the author

Michel Claessens holds a Ph.D. from Brussels' University. He used to be a head of communication in the European Commission and for the international ITER project (nuclear fusion). A specialist of science policy, science communication and public perception of science, Michel Claessens is an active member of international scientific networks and a frequent speaker at international conferences. He has published 17 books, including "ITER, The Giant Fusion Reactor" (Springer, 2023), 14 research papers, and over 250 popularisation articles.

michel_claessens@yahoo.fr

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