



REVIEW

Far div ye bide?

Reviewed Conference

PCST 2025

Using Science Communication to Effect Positive Change: Exploring Transitions, Traditions and Tensions

Aberdeen, Scotland

27–29 May 2025

Reviewed by

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Abstract

PCST 2025 took place in the silver city of Aberdeen, Scotland. Named for the sparkle of the mica in the granite of which it is largely built, Aberdeen was first scheduled to host the PCST conference in 2020, when it was cancelled due to the COVID pandemic. The conference was then hosted online in 2021, coming back to Aberdeen in person in April of 2025.

Keywords

Scholarly communication; Public engagement with science and technology

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In Doric, a dialect spoken in Aberdeen, 'Far div ye bide?' means, 'Where do you live?'. This could easily be a theme of this conference, not only in terms of geography, but also in terms of delegates' disciplines or professional practice. The actual theme was 'Transitions, Traditions, and Tensions', and certainly the last of these was in evidence in informal networking conversations between delegates. The many opportunities to network and exchange were one of the triumphs of this conference. At least three 30- to 60-minute breaks each day allowed plenty of time, well fuelled by coffee and Scottish tablet, a powerfully energising mix of butter, sugar and condensed milk boiled into a sweet. Common topics included threats to scientific discourse, international exchange, and academic freedom.

Before the conference began there was a day of workshops from delegates which supported peer learning. With around 32 workshops to choose from there was perhaps a little too much choice however, which might be the root of an issue in organisation for this workshop day. There was confusion on locations, which workshops were running or cancelled, where people registered to a cancelled workshop were (or were not) reallocated to, and some workshops ran for three hours without access to even water. This criticism aside, the quality of content and general reception of the workshop day were very high, and hopefully PCST will continue with this pre-day format.

The main conference programme opened with the Directors of the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement in the UK, Sophie Duncan and Paul Manners, speaking of the value of engagement and open science. The themes in this plenary were nicely reflected in the closing plenary from Rajesh Tandon, and both framed the conference perfectly in highlighting the value of different epistemologies to science. However, one point touched on in both plenaries, the value of science communication to science itself, was largely lacking from the conference. For example, despite some fantastic sessions on new horizons in science communication research, papers were focused on a particular set of outcomes and measurements directed at the public, who, in a mutually beneficial dialogue are only one half of the equation.

There were some very welcome presentations, however, that broke this mould. One that stood out was Bruce Lewenstein's paper 'Does PE Make Science Better?' in which he presented research that starts to question contributions or effects on research outcomes, project management, and public recruitment to participation in research. His presence on the cutting edge of science communication research was also deservedly recognised at PCST 2025 when he became the inaugural recipient of the Award for the Advancement of Science Communication as a Professional Field (PCST Award).

In the same parallel session Jenni Metcalfe spoke on the practice of reflexivity in science communication work. Metcalfe presented work demonstrating how developing an understanding of the diverse traditions, cultures, and contexts in the communities engaged with supports the framing of appropriate communication activity. I found it refreshing to see these practice-based insights presented in a science communication research forum, representing as it does a recognition of practitioner experience.

Good paper presentations often leave you with more questions than answers. This was the case in a session on the 'Realities and tensions of university communication and science communication'. Marta Entradas introduced research on the tensions between decentralised science communication versus centralised PR and marketing communications. Her study [Entradas et al., 2024] points out that science communication is often decentralised and presented as 'unpredictable' and therefore risky. Whereas PR, marketing and public affairs communication are largely centralised and highly focussed on corporate image. However, for this study, the survey was sent to the central communications offices to respond to. It would be very interesting to know how these tensions, which undoubtedly exist, are reflected from practitioners' or researchers' perspectives. Other questions this session left delegates with included,

- With central communication offices in the US focussing on the current crisis in academia and on defending Universities from central government interventions, will science communication evolve to be even more decentralised there?
- With one speaker calling for more strategic thinkers who consider dialogue a tool, not a goal, is the divide between practitioners, who very much consider the goal of mutually beneficial dialogue to be strategically developed with tools and frameworks, and science communication researchers in fact widening?
- Are practitioners in fact to blame here by not communicating the strategic development and outcomes of their activities better in the manner academia (rightly or wrongly) largely communicates, peer reviewed publications?

Practical sessions such as 'Meet the Editor' were very helpful, giving real insight into the whole publication process. Even here, however, the understanding of terms, of priorities, and of the value of different epistemologies are very broad and often in fact conflicting. In defining their scope, one journal asks for a broad spectrum of inputs from all sectors, not just the academic sector. These are then fully peer reviewed in an academic context. In contrast, another editor appeared dismissive of any submissions from outside of the academic context as not at all relevant to the interrelations between science and the public. Another editor who, when asked what advice they had for authors, asked that more contributions consider the history of the literature as they frequently receive submissions that are naive regarding previous publications. This left questions around what responsibility lies with the journals themselves to address this. Could a way forward in bridging the theory and practice gap include recruiting more practitioner reviewers, many of whom have strong academic backgrounds?

Many more Performance sessions were delivered in Aberdeen than in previous conferences. These sessions, mostly interactive, some very hands-on for the delegates, were designed to give practical demonstrations of science communication in action, often alongside insights of the outcomes and impacts of the activities. These proved to be both popular and a talking point, however, being at the end of the conference day they weren't always well attended. It is a format that I hope PCST will include in the future and integrate more across the programme.

Overall, PCST Aberdeen left us with answers, but more importantly, left us with questions. While it showed we still have a significant gap between practice and theory, it also showed we are making strides towards reducing it. Some very welcome sessions pushed the borders

of science communication research, asking more reflective questions of practice and outcomes, and a new generation of researchers and professionals are asking thought-provoking questions about the future of the sector. My hope is that this push into the unknown will be a strong focus for the community in the next two years before PCST in Shanghai.

References

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About the author

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