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Comment

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION FROM RESEARCH INSTITUTES: IS IT SCIENCE COMMUNICATION OR PUBLIC RELATIONS?

Research institutions: neither doing science communication nor promoting 'public' relations

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ABSTRACT: *In this commentary I explain why research institutions are neither doing science communication nor developing 'public' relations in the proper sense. Their activities are rather a mix of different things, serving various purposes and targets. However, dealing with PCST, their main responsibilities [should] include: promoting genuine communication and dialogue, being open and accessible to the public, providing high quality scientific information, ensuring good internal communication and educating their scientific staff.*

After more than 20 years spent in communication and PR (Public relations) departments of publicly funded research organisations, I have to say that the question addressed by these commentaries is an interesting one. It is always a healthy exercise to question the very essence of our own work: what are we, as professional communicators, doing? What are we aiming at? Within our respective organisations, what is our main task: are we promoting (mainly) science communication or (mainly) the institution which employs us?

I tend to answer: 'None of these'. Firstly, because to a very large extent research institutions do not promote genuine communication. Real communication (in the sense of a dialogue) is still almost absent in the fields of science. And secondly because research institutions' PR work hardly involves the real 'public'. Nevertheless, I tend to agree that we are trying to develop public communication, in addition or in parallel with promoting science relations. Most research institutions target in priority their 'stakeholders', which include decision-makers, politicians and the scientific community. The public (and young people in particular) is too far away from their short-term objectives and long-term challenges. Similarly, media is not a target *per se*, but essentially a means to reach (and hopefully influence) stakeholders and opinion leaders. This leads to the following question: what should research institutions, which are the main producers of scientific knowledge, be doing in the field of public communication/PR? Should they rethink and reorganise their activities?

The lack of science communication

To begin with, let me first remind the reader that the current *bilan* of public communication of science and technology (PCST) is widely considered as unsatisfactory, despite the great diversity and complementarity of scientific contributions worldwide in constructing this field [6]. Citizens still feel 'left aside' because they see that scientific research and its applications are most often discussed and decided without involving them. Science is seen as a 'closed shop' with the public having no say in its development. Rarely do discussions and public debates accompany decisions about research issues and priorities. On the other hand, scientists have the impression that they are increasingly unheard and not being listened to.

The fact is that the scientific community is lacking a genuine science communication culture, and because of this, the public at large is not in a position to anticipate scientific and technological crises, or deal and appropriate future developments. Let me only mention here three examples - nuclear energy, GMOs and cloning — where a number of scientific issues in these three areas remain in the strictest sense of the word 'uncommunicated'. In 2007, an advisory board to the European Commission warned the scientific community about not paying enough attention to being in dialogue with society [4]. The diagnostic is still valid today: more societal engagement and open dialogue are needed to avoid lost opportunities and suspicion about R&D in the future, in particular in emerging research fields: *"In Europe, GMOs, nuclear energy and crop protection science are examples where all research elements were in place but the societal concerns were misrepresented or not adequately considered, leading to a loss of public trust that has been detrimental to the innovation process."* As a matter of fact, PCST activities should address equally the need to inform the public as the need to improve communication between scientists and the whole society.

This lack of genuine communication and dialogue deeply handicaps science-society relationships and the public acceptance of advancements in science and technology. Furthermore, the public wants to be consulted and involved in shaping the course of 'progress' and the decision-making process. How do we build public trust? How do we improve the dialogue between science and society? Scientists are encouraged or even obliged to inform audiences about what they are doing, but they also have an imperative to listen. Researchers these days must understand the social context within which they operate: what people worry about, what they expect or need from science, what they do not want in their lives. In short, the ivory tower is no longer an option. Despite a growing involvement of the research actors in public communication worldwide, and increasing support from the public authorities for them, there is still a large gap between science and society. This explains why scientists and research managers have high expectations about PCST.

In my opinion, research institutions have the responsibility to contribute to the development of a genuine science communication context. It could be for example through the systematic and even perhaps institutionalised organisation of public consensus conferences. These scientific 'grand juries' could stimulate communication and political

decision-making in scientifically controversial areas. Used judiciously, they could offer a realistic answer to our society's inability to control and appreciate the development and the application of science and technology [1]. Communicating is truly an imperative in a democracy, and this applies also to scientific research if one is to build trust and legitimacy for activities funded in great part by the public.

Training and communicating to staff

An important responsibility of communication/PR departments in research institutions is also to educate scientists to science communication. Publicly funded research organisations in Europe and elsewhere increasingly encourage and even require their beneficiaries to engage with the public and the media. Most of them promote scientific outreach activities and may provide some training needed by scientists to allow them to carry out those activities effectively. In particular, more and more grant-holders are required to develop a public communication strategy and in doing so they can get help from their organisation's information and press staff.

Some basic education is also needed because scientists are still used to disseminate clichés and personal values about PCST. These clichés can be summarized as follows [5]: people no longer trust scientists; science journalism is dead; entertainment media promote a culture of anti-science; the problem is the public, not scientists or policymakers; political views don't influence the judgements of scientists; the public, and especially young people, are no longer interested in science.

I am puzzled to see that some PCST models and principles, although very basic and even naive or archaic, are still referred to and promoted by the scientific community. The same applies also to models and practices glorifying 'science communication' (which is at best, as I tried to explain, an oxymoron). Indeed, everyone could agree with the fact that science is, in a strict sense, *incommunicable*. A scientific theory or equation is not subject to an exchange between promoters and opponents. It is true — or not. More exactly, it is either verified — or not — by experiments. What we call public 'science communication' is actually a communication on the applications and the issues arising from science (and more rarely, which is regrettable, on its limits).

Last but not least, internal communication is also increasingly a challenge for research institutions. In a society confronted with major and global problems, there is a growing need to set up multidisciplinary approaches.[1] As a result, research projects like ITER are

[1]Everybody's hyperspecialisation is an obstacle preventing us seeing the global picture, since it is fragmented into parcels. However, essential issues are never fragmented and global issues are more and more binding. This leads to raise the question about the place and role of scientists in a society confronted with such major and multifaceted problems. I found [3] that the concept of 'miscompetence' plays a key role, here. Just as misunderstanding describes poor understanding, 'miscompetence' means a lack of competence. In principle, scientists are not incompetent. What is required to address the main questions of our time are multiple and distributed competences. Miscompetence is, for each of us, altogether a reality, a weakness and a strength. Acknowledging our lack of competences will advantageously lead to the development of cooperative approaches.

now considered as references and even models for international cooperation and multidisciplinary work. This is particularly exemplified by ITER where many events are organised to bring together the many cultures and professional profiles which compose the organisation. This is done through training sessions, international seminars, colloquia, team building events, conferences across several continents and intercultural meetings, which confirm the strong need to understand one another in order to work more efficiently together. ITER employees are setting a precedent in learning intercultural skills in order to help prevent possible misunderstanding and inefficient communication. Working in a multicultural team has specific challenges and these need to be addressed instead of ignored. Recognizing the human dimensions of any scientific project is a pre-requisite for its success.

All this is quite easy to write and say; it is more difficult to achieve in real life. For example, a major challenge for communication/PR departments is to resist the pressures of their top management. There is indeed a natural tendency to use communication tools for self-promotion (individual and organizational). Explicit or implicit in many research institutions' communication strategies is the objective of not just informing the public but also of shaping and influencing the public opinion. This is particularly perceptible in areas like nuclear energy and biotechnology. Visiting Monsanto headquarters in the US some time ago, top managers told me that they underestimated the reactions of the European consumers against GM food and should they have known this in advance they would have completely revised their corporate communication. Few research organisations can claim of having a communication/PR strategy free of *arrière-pensées*.

Communication/PR departments of research institutions should not only provide high-quality scientific information (and hence work closely with the scientists) but also aim to achieve openness, which starts with grassroots objectives such as having some visibility on the local roads ('scientific tourism') and obviously on the electronic grid (the web). Openness also requires openings, for example through 'Open doors' days, which are in general very popular. Also needed is to embark in social media in order to reach and communicate with and like the young generations.

In short the objective should be to promote both genuine science communication and 'public' relations. This will make sure that the research institutions' 'mediascientific'[2] discourse is both credible and transparent. This is the price we pay to set up and support complex scientific projects. I see this happening at ITER where, thanks to a shift in our public communication, we have observed qualitative and quantitative improvements in media reports.

[2] I refer to *mediascience* [2] to remind people that media, and television in particular, are the premium source of scientific information for the European public.

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