

Review

Communicating Science for social inclusion and political engagement: reflections on the PCST Conference, Brazil 2014

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13th International Public Communication of Science and Technology Conference (PCST), Salvador, Brazil, 5–8 May 2014

ABSTRACT: The 13th International Public Communication of Science and Technology (PCST) conference offered a valuable opportunity for over 500 science communicators to congregate and network with the international community. While the sheer size of the event made fostering debate somewhat of a challenge, the pertinent theme of ‘science communication for social inclusion and political engagement’, inspired some thought-provoking talks. Certainly, it was an appropriate time for this topic to be explored in Brazil, a developing country with a national government actively working towards greater social inclusion and local scientific development.

The 13th International Public Communication of Science and Technology Conference (PCST) took place in Salvador, Brazil from 5 to 8 May 2014. This bi-annual conference has been organised by the PCST network since 1989 with the aim of encouraging discussion and sharing experiences about the practice and research of science communication. To date, the conference has been hosted by countries in Europe (7), Asia (2), Africa (1), North America (1) and Australia (1). However, this is the first time that it has taken place in Latin America.

PCST 2014 brought together around 500 science communicators from 49 nations with 60% of the delegates representing developing countries. In this marathon programme, 100 unique sessions took place over the 3 days including panel discussions, performances, individual communications, show and tell sessions, workshops and poster sessions. The conference was organised in association with The Museum of Life, Casa de Oswaldo Fiocruz, The Laboratory for Advanced Research in Journalism and State University of Campinas.

The central theme of the conference was ‘science communication for social inclusion and political engagement’. The theme of social inclusion is an emerging preoccupation

in the science communication field [1]. It reflects the important role that science plays in economic and social development and is a reminder that while the public in developed nations might be enjoying greater access to science and technology, much of the world still faces poverty and social exclusion. Certainly, it was an appropriate time for this event to be held Brazil, a developing country that is increasingly involved in the international scientific scene and with a government actively working to boost local scientific development (<http://www.cienciasemfronteiras.gov.br/web/csf-eng/>).

At the conference, the theme of social inclusion was reflected in the lower registration charges and bursaries offered to students from lower income countries, and the translation of plenary discussions into Spanish, English and Portuguese, which allowed for wider, inter-cultural participation. Contributors were also asked to explore this theme in their work and it was the subject of the opening plenary on 6 May, featuring Claudia Aguirre of Parque Explora, Colombia, Elizabeth Rasekoala of the African-Caribbean Network for Science and Technology (ACNST) and Alfredo Wagner of the Federal University of Amazonas.

Claudia Aguirre gave a compelling presentation about the popularization of science through the “Explora” science centre in Medellin, Colombia. The aim of Explora is to boost public interest in scientific and technological knowledge and to promote civic, scientific culture (<http://www.parqueexplora.org/>). It is based in one of the most violent areas of the city and its primary target is a highly impoverished community that has built their homes on a ‘mountain of trash’. Through interactive workshops and exhibitions, the Centre has engaged the local community, encouraging them to collect trash for recycling, empowering them to map their physical surroundings and speaking to them about the science of daily needs such as personal hygiene and food propagation. Aguirre emphasised the importance of turning science into an integral part of everyday life. Her take home message was that ‘science must be linked to daily life otherwise people are not interested’. This seemingly simple message is relevant to boost public participation in science in any context.

Elizabeth Rasekoala, of Nigeria, on the other hand, spoke passionately about the importance of human capital development, race and gender equality and social inclusion. ‘Do I look like a chemical engineer?’ she challenged standing proudly in her traditional dress. ‘Science in the ivory tower is pale and male. Young girls need to know that a chemist can look like them she continued. However, she noted that language remains a barrier to local ownership of science, with many local idioms being too imprecise for scientific explanation. Interestingly, while Rasekoala applauded so many women for attending the conference, a provocative question from the audience challenged whether science communication has not become a form of female ‘ghettoization’ in science? This is an important consideration indeed.

Another key topic explored at PCST was social media as a new model of science communication. Although one might argue that this is not a truly equitable communication model since access to the Internet is often scarce in impoverished communities, nevertheless, social media can potentially facilitate engagement with a more diverse audience and greater public inclusion in the production of science communication. In the second ple-

nary discussion, on 7 May, Dominique Brossard of the University of Wisconsin, United States, provided an interesting analysis of everyday coverage of science communication, placing emphasis on the importance of science blogging, which can play a valuable role in exploring new models and channels of scientific writing. Mohammed Yahia, the editor of Nature Middle East, also discussed the potential of social media for science communication. Like Bossard, he noted that very little is known about the value of social media despite its increasing pervasiveness. He presented social media as a valuable tool that enables scientists to get closer to their audience, work more collaboratively with them and produce work directly informed by audience needs and questions. However, he warned that participation in social media requires a new, more informal approach and involves adapting, evolving and embracing change.

In conclusion, the PCST conference presented a valuable opportunity for science communicators throughout the world to meet the international community and to network. It was particularly important for strengthening science communication networks across South America. The only drawback of the event was its sheer size which made fostering true debate a challenge. For example, while the plenary sessions were often too large to facilitate in-depth discussion, the individual presentations, due to the high number of parallel sessions (14), were often poorly attended and dialogue was sometimes sparse. Nevertheless, the thought-provoking theme inspired many engaging presentations, which were particularly relevant to communicators, such as myself, who are working in developing contexts. I acknowledge the generous support provided by the Wellcome Trust, which enabled me to attend this event and look forward to the 2016 meeting in Istanbul, Turkey (watch <http://pcst2016.org/> for more details).

References

- [1] L. Massarani and M. Merzagora (2014), “Socially inclusive science communication”, *JCOM* **13**(02): C01.

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