Five years of JCOM — inclusive, comprehensive or could we do better?

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Abstract

Looking back over the past 5 years of articles published in JCOM, this editorial looks at the topics covered and the geographies represented and asks: are we tackling all main contemporary issues in science communication/popularisation or public engagement? It invites you to contribute with your papers, letters, essays and news to help address the holes in our coverage and to enter into dialogue on our Facebook page.

Keywords

Scholarly communication

Introduction

As an open access journal, JCOM seeks to provide an inclusive platform that enables scholars and practitioners from around the world to share their ideas, research and practice. As it claims on our website: 'JCOM is a platform where distant communities can meet: academic scholars, journalists, museum operators, and scientists who live and work in fields where theoretical reflection and concrete action are strongly intertwined'. It should offer practitioners access and insights into science communication theory, and how it might serve the practitioner community, access to the latest relevant research and practical advice on how to implement aspects, such as project evaluation. Equally, JCOM ought to enable researchers to gain insights into the issues practitioners face and their research needs. Furthermore, JCOM seeks contributions from around the world reflecting the research and practice contexts in which we, the global science communication/public engagement field, sit. It should not be Euro- or Anglo-centric. Does it do that? It's a hard question to answer, but by analysing the articles published over the past 5 years, I hope to provide some insight into the topics covered, the geographies represented and also the gaps we need to fill.

What's hot and what's not?

To be honest, I'm rather disappointed to find that science in the media (print) is the single most frequently covered topic in articles and essays published by JCOM (nb. this analysis excluded commentaries). And by quite a long way, with 19 articles reporting on print media coverage of science around the world. There are new things to learn from media content analysis and comparative studies can tell us how media coverage has changed, compare coverage across disciplines or geographies, but this is also a long-established and increasingly crowded research field. Furthermore, changes in technology and publishing mean that publics are

accessing scientific information in new ways, yet digital technologies (Internet, mobile communications) were only the subjects of 4 studies over the 5 year period. A word of warning, key words have changed over the years, so I have not relied on the self-selected key words identified by authors, but reviewed the abstracts of all articles and essays published since 2011.[1] So, these are my categorisations and it may well be that media is such a large category because it is relatively easy to spot and group. Nevertheless, 'science in the media' remains a popular category, even more so when you consider that I moved 4 studies on radio and TV into a separate category (owing to the fact that these are indeed less commonly explored in media research). If we stick with writing, I categorised 5 articles as covering 'science writing' (some covered media but considered wider questions about writing), a further two papers looked at bloggers and blogging, while 7 studies looked at scholarly communication.

Sticking with 'sites' for communication, museums and science centres were the focus for 8 papers, and 5 papers (none in the last 2 years) explored the way that science moves into commercial settings or communities of practice and 8 studies looked at science in art, literature, films or cultural settings (e.g. festivals).

Education (5 articles) and informal learning (8 articles) remain topics of interest as does evaluation (4 papers). Six papers considered public understanding of science and technology (e.g. knowledge) as a primary theme, while public perception of science and technology (e.g. opinions, attitudes) was a key focus for 5 papers. Participation and governance were key themes for 7 papers. Two papers explored the history of public communication of science and technology and three looked at public representation of science and technology.

Visualisation and images were considered in 2 papers, as was narrative. Three papers considered citizen science (the special issue on this topic was not included in this analysis). Papers explored health communication (5), environmental communication (3) and risk communication (5) and one paper considered public relations. While I categorised 8 papers as exploring science communication theory, this is likely to be an underestimate of the number of papers that explore or build theory.

Public engagement was a tricky terms to consider in the context of this analysis. It was used by many authors, but in most cases the papers were not exploring public engagement processes, but rather using some form of public engagement which seemed to fit better under other categories. I therefore sought to categorise papers using other terms.

Over the past 5 years, it seems that JCOM has published a few papers on emerging areas (e.g. citizen science, visualisation, new digital technologies, social inclusion), but that the majority of papers focus on what we might call traditional themes (media, public understanding, participation and governance). I found a few papers

[1] For those interested in methodology, I manually scanned the abstracts of all articles and essays to ascertain the key focus of the paper. Papers could be categorised in one or more key word areas. I ignored author selected key words, and while I would say there is some agreement between my categorisation and that of authors, it is by no means 100% with authors often including fairly generic terms (and in some cases no key words at all). This could not be said to be a robust study, but does give a flavour of JCOM.

that used 'social inclusion' as a key word but this often did not feature clearly in the abstract, and so they were not, in the end, categorised under this topic. Other gaps would seem to be studies focusing explicitly on science communication practitioners (blogging and one study of explainers being obvious exceptions), public roles and construction of publics, games and gamification, open science and big data, to name but a few of the more obvious absences. It is worth noting that many of these topics are addressed by commentaries, with recent collections considering: climate science and visual arts, science as activism, open science, social inclusion and science festivals.

Geographical representation

JCOM also seeks to be a platform for a wide range of voices (geographical and disciplinary). Considering only research papers and essays that were published in 2015, corresponding authors represent a range of countries: Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Kenya, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Spain, Switzerland, UK, USA, Uruguay. This represents a diverse range of nations with differing approaches to science communication and is something we should celebrate (while continuing to encourage submission from around the world). 17 (of 22) corresponding authors held posts in academia, with the remaining 5 representing a range of practitioner communities (including data analysis consultancies and the teaching profession). Had I included commentaries in the analysis, it is likely that the number of practitioners represented would increase, as is reflected in the comment addressing training from a variety of perspectives that are published in this issue. Nevertheless, it is clear that published research papers and essays are primarily written by the research community. The fact that research papers emanate primarily from the academy is not particularly surprising, but we should perhaps ask whether these papers do meet the needs of practitioners' and I welcome feedback and thoughts regarding the range of material published, including suggestions for new types of articles that might interest our readership.

I am delighted that we receive a good range of quality research from around the world. I would welcome submissions that seek to address research gaps and address new and emerging areas of science communication. I also welcome suggestions on how best to provide a platform that publishes stimulating, thought provoking articles that shed light on the wider field of science communication/public engagement/popularisation and give voice not only to the interests of the research community but also those working in the diverse settings where science communication occurs, be that museums, science cafes, festivals or the plethora of emerging communication opportunities in the digital sphere. Comments and thoughts on this editorial and the journal in general are welcome; send them to me, post to the editorial office or get in touch via our Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/jcom.sissa.it/?fref=ts). We are also interested in receiving news on national surveys and reports, conferences and training opportunities and other publications and events that are of interest for our community. JCOM is your publication; make it work for you.

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