



Report — 2nd meeting of mediation of knowledge and scientific culture

Reviewed Conference

2nd MEETING OF MEDIATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND SCIENTIFIC CULTURE, PAVILHÃO DO CONHECIMENTO, LISBON, PORTUGAL, 3–4 FEBRUARY 2020

Reviewed by

Diogo Santos

Abstract

On 3rd and 4th February, at Pavilhão do Conhecimento (Lisbon, Portugal), Ciência Viva organized the 2nd meeting of Mediation of Knowledge and Scientific Culture. This edition reunited politicians, teachers, science communicators and researchers to discuss culture, science communication and museums. The organization promoted workshops and invited three keynote speakers: Abdulaziz Alhegelan, Brian Trench and Ngaire Blankenberg who led discussions around cultural differences, science communication processes such as evaluation or impact, and how museums need to change to become more neutral.

Keywords

History of public communication of science; Popularization of science and technology; Science centres and museums

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.22323/2.19020601>

Submitted: 14th February 2020

Accepted: 11th March 2020

Published: 23rd March 2020

The second edition of the Meeting of Mediation of Knowledge and Scientific Culture, organized by Ciência Viva, had the focus on culture, science communication and museums. Besides keynotes, the organization also included workshops that have challenged participants to think — in groups — about a variety of aspects related with science communication and citizen science. For instance, in one workshop a certain group had to role-play as theater’s directors in order to use art and science to engage the community in strategies to better communicate about viral diseases; in the other exercise, groups were challenged to design some sort of science fair, from the concept to the route that would be taken by participants.

Regarding the keynotes, Abdulaziz Alhegelan [Mishkat Interactive Center for Atomic and Renewable Energies, and The North Africa and Middle East Science centers network (NAMES)] was the first speaker and in “Enhancing the dialogue between cultures” he talked mostly about his journey within the science

communication community in the Middle East. He believes firmly that culture shouldn't be an obstacle for anyone doing science communication or any other task. "Challenges in Middle East are the same as in Europe". In open conversation with the audience, Abdulaziz expanded on the hard task that we all face: the world's dependency on fossil energy. From his words, in order to communicate about this (and other global themes), we should focus on the subject and not on the cultural differences between countries, regions or faiths.

But, in reality, is this possible? The Middle East has some of the biggest oil reserves in the world and the economy of those countries is firmly glued — in some cases is the one and only income — to this industry. There was a consensus that we should put our efforts on building bridges between cultures and ignore differences, but — and we didn't have much time to discuss this — one thing that some communication theories teach us is that we should put the audience in the middle. We can agree that the theme is the same, but the audience is diverse in so many aspects. This will result in different approaches that must take into account cultural differences to produce content that can potentially be effective. Another aspect that is certainly sensitive is that some cultural differences are just too significant to be ignored in a well rounded (science) communication process, such as the role of women in some countries.

The second keynote speaker was Brian Trench, President of Public Communication of Science and Technology Network (PCST), and he set the tone early with the quote "more important than public understanding of science, is important that the public understands the world through science. Science communication is an integral part of science". Brian then talked about Scientific Culture and how it has different definitions depending on the country, showing how diverse the conversation can be and consequently the process of evaluating both science culture and science communication. He simply stated that we "should use qualitative data" and that utilizing numbers to measure science communication impact doesn't make any sense.

After showing some frameworks, Brian Trench jumped to the main idea that "science communication is the social conversation around science". In that regard he showed a few examples of arts and science, where filmmakers and musicians — none of them with any sort of scientific background — created pieces with scientific content that promoted conversations around and about scientific topics. In part, this is why Brian Trench also said that we don't necessarily need scientists or science communicators to communicate science.

To accomplish this type of vision, Brian Trench urged teachers and communicators to start thinking about how their work is stimulating conversations around science. In order to reach this synergy where 1) science and scientific content is anywhere and 2) the public can generate conversations around that content, we must do more to promote scientific culture in everything we do and in every role we take. And we need to do all of this despite the crescendo of anti-scientific discourses — some of them with big public figures and forces behind — on social media. A common idea discussed during this conversation is that we all need to be constantly asking "how do they know what they know?". So, this is, in fact, another challenge that we need to take in consideration: the lack of critical thinking in our society.

In order to do that, we must also think a bit more about museums (public spaces in general) and how they position themselves in our society, and that's precisely what Ngaire Blankenberg made us do during her keynote "Museums as safe places". With a vast experience, Ngaire talked about the importance of thinking about museums as spaces of inclusion in variety of aspects, from the physical space to discourse and language. She also talked about science, stating that science isn't neutral much like museums that are or can be places of power. An example are representations of colonialism that can quickly become a racist and sexist discourse that can't produce context or compassion through the people who suffered. During the keynote, the audience was challenged a few times to think, share and listen to the people around talking about their experiences in museums, like this history of a ticket vendor that tries to discourage visitors because the experience is "too poor and doesn't justify the ticket price" or another one about a science museum that captivates parents with good marketing campaigns and then all the discourse, experiences and exhibitions are made for children.

The conference gave all the participants plenty of ideas to digest and implement at work, being that a school, a museum, a research center or a public organization. Culture, science and public spaces are concepts that must be connected all the time because, in the end, they are part of the journey that we all need to walk in order to create and contribute for a tolerant society based on knowledge.

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How to cite

Santos, D. (2020). 'Report — 2nd meeting of mediation of knowledge and scientific culture'. *JCOM* 19 (02), R01. <https://doi.org/10.22323/2.19020601>.



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ISSN 1824-2049. Published by SISSA Medialab. jcom.sissa.it