

## From ‘post truth’ to e-persons, contemporary issues in science communication

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### **Abstract**

The Science in Public Conference, held this year at the University of Sheffield, generated animated discussion of a wide range of topics. Six commentaries cover conference themes around engagement with science and technology and how science and technology are shaping what it means to be human. The commentaries range from discussions of our relationship with expertise and how science communication can better act as a knowledge broker in a time of ‘alternative facts’ to exploration of fictional narratives and how they might be used to open up dialogue about science and technology.

### **Keywords**

Public engagement with science and technology; Public perception of science and technology; Representations of science and technology

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This year’s Science in Public conference, hosted by the University of Sheffield, UK set out to explore the ways that science and technology shape what it means to be human.<sup>1</sup> We invited panel organisers to contribute commentaries inspired by their sessions, particularly those focusing on the ways that science communication is exploring expertise and ‘personhood’ and the ways that we imagine future technologies. The resulting six commentaries offer a window on the diverse discussion and wide range of disciplinary perspectives that came together for the conference.

Pete Broks [2017] starts by exploring how we might reconceptualise the practice of science communication, arguing that in a post-truth era, something radical needs to be done. He suggests that we need to start with the question ‘what’s the point of science communication?’ as a way of focusing on the purpose — what is it we want the public to do when they ‘engage’ with science? Broks argues for a radical rethink of science communication, suggesting that the move to upstream engagement, where the public is involved in decisions about what science is done, what technology is created rather than presented with new technologies, may provide part of the solution. As Broks argues, the move toward upstream engagement ‘forces us to address fundamental questions not only about what we are trying to do with science, technology and innovation but also about the role and purpose of the public’s engagement with these’.

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<sup>1</sup>Details of the conference themes and the Science in Public Network can be found here: <https://scienceinpublic.org/science-in-public-2017/>.

Berditchevskaia, Regalado and Duin [2017] also address the issue of expertise, exploring the role of knowledge brokers (such as science communicators) in an increasingly contested and fragmented knowledge sphere. This commentary explores the factors that influence 'non-exchange' of expertise and how this can be overcome. After exploring some of the reasons for non-exchange, Berditchevskaia et al. move on to consider ways to encourage information sharing, considering movements such as the open laboratory movement and citizen science as ways to encourage participation in science. Through the examples they explore, Berditchevskaia et al. argue that 'we can see that effective knowledge transfer results from all actors having a stake in the outcome and a power dynamic that accommodates the potential for a meaningful contribution from all sides.' Like Broks, Berditchevskaia et al. also call for a rethinking of the relationship between science and society and the way that science communication is often practiced.

Picking up a slightly different angle, Fogg-Rogers [2017] considers how the way that science and technology are represented and discussed affects women's decisions to pursue STEM careers. She argues that representations of STEM in society affect not only the choices women make to pursue (or not) careers in these fields, but also what is researched and the types of technology that are developed. She argues strongly that we all need to take responsibility for increasing gender equity.

The final three commentaries all focus on robotics and artificial intelligence in one way or another. Szollosy [2017] considers the question 'are robots e-persons?' in the context of a recent EU report on robotics and artificial intelligence. The paper explains clearly how this initiative fits into the EU legislative process, the problems presented by the report (it is still not clear exactly what a robot is for the purposes of this initiative) and some of the implications of conferring e-Personhood on robots (e.g. removal of liability from creators). The commentary also explores the way we ascribe rights to different types of beings, considering the case of the hitchBOT (hitch hiking robot) that was destroyed when hitching across the United States (was this a case of property damage or were the hitchBOT's rights infringed?).

Also taking the EU report as a starting point, Stengler and Escudero Pérez [2017] consider the role of science fiction in our understanding of robots. They argue that, while historically, science fiction has often used technology to explore what it means to be human, we are now seeing the rise of science fiction (particularly films) that explore what it means for technology to be human (i.e. scams perpetrated on robots). They argue that these films, by imagining a future that includes robots within society, may alert us to issues we need to address (before they arise). Reinsborough [2017] addresses a similar theme, arguing that science fiction is a useful way for us to explore potential, imagined futures and the relationships with technology that they imply. He argues that science fiction, through its imagining of potential futures, opens up a new space for dialogue between researchers and the public. He also reminds us that the imagined futures represented in fiction also play a role in shaping research and policy agendas, harking back to the EU report covering e-personhood.

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