Little country, big talk

Book B. Trench, P. Murphy and D. Fahy eds. (2017)
Little Country, Big Talk: Science Communication in Ireland.
U.K.: The Pantaneto Press

Reviewed by **Toss Gascoigne**

Abstract Modern science communication has emerged as a field of study, a body of practice and a profession. In the last 60 years, we have seen the birth of interactive science centres, university courses, the first research into science communication, and a growth in employment by research institutions, universities, museums, science centres and industry. Now Ireland has told its story.

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How science communication emerged in different countries, and why are matters of increasing interest. JCom devoted a special issue to this area last year, with 16 chapters examining different aspects across the world.

Earlier, in 2014, the PCST conference in Brazil explored different national pathways. Thirteen speakers explained the course their country took, charting the key dates and events as science communication grew and developed.

Now *Little Country, Big Talk* sets out the Irish experience. The editors say it is comparable with developments in other countries and many of the markers are there: the first courses at university, employment opportunities, conferences and science centres.

Why would anyone wish to track the emergence of science communication in Ireland? There are lessons to be learned, mistakes to avoid and ideas to be borrowed. Although the focus is Ireland, many of the issues travel internationally.

It has been a remarkable story, considering Ireland has been an independent nation for less than 100 years. The period leading up to and after independence was turbulent: the potato famine of the 1840s, a population which dropped from 6.5 million in 1841 to a low point of 2.8 million in 1961; sectarian violence and financial crisis.

That Ireland had the time or energy for science in these circumstances is something of a miracle. But it has, producing notable scientists and science communicators, and initiatives like the internationally-renowned Science Gallery. There's a sense in the title that Ireland believes it punches above its weight.

So what do the 19 chapters cover? Ten are substantial chapters, research-based and accompanied by references; and the other nine are vignettes giving short insights into careers and ideas.

Brian Trench begins by setting out what he describes as the 'rocky road of science communication' in Ireland, working from the mid-1990s. After years of neglect, the government announced new investment in science to create a knowledge-based economy and employment. The implicit role for science communication was as cheer-leader, building public support and awareness.

He documents development since then, in the media, education, institutional funding and government programs. Progress is not linear: the 'rocky road' is a reference to stop-start programs, the failure (so far) to build a national science centre, or to move from a promotional to a dialogical role for science communication.

In a subsequent chapter Trench goes further into the cultural settings. Literature, performing arts and Celtic culture traditionally defined Ireland, and in national studies science barely rated a mention. It was seen as a Protestant activity in a majority Catholic community. But things are changing: an analysis of surveys shows Ireland sits comfortably enough with science:

> A picture emerges of a population that is not notably interested in or informed about science, nor strongly motivated to discuss scientific developments or their implications in public, but accepts science's influence within society and trusts scientists.

Subsequent chapters develop the story. Declan Fahy looks at the media, describing coverage of science as 'scant, sporadic and one-dimensional." He deplores its superficiality, the lack of analysis, the celebratory tone. There are few dedicated science journalists, and the *Irish Times* alone carries the flag, in both quality and quantity.

Fahy describes four possible solutions. He favours a move into 'knowledge-based journalism, in which reporters apply a range of expert views to particular social problems.' Climate change for example would be reported through different lenses: economic, policy and social implications.

Social media might be a solution, particularly to encourage a dialogue. Could scientists be encouraged to tell their own stories? There are impediments: few institutions have a social media policy, or reward media activity. Marie Boran's research shows scientists have mixed views on blogging, tweeting and discussion groups. (Jenni Metcalfe and I found Australian scientists had a similar ambivalence on engaging the public, citing a reward system encouraging publication over engagement [Gascoigne and Metcalfe, 1997]).

Padraig Murphy explores the gap which has emerged in Irish society through four case studies: nuclear power, the GM potato, biopolitics of embryos, and fracking. The conversation is dominated by the 'Big Talk' of strategic policy, but what about the 'small talk' of communities of resistance? How are these issues framed and articulated, and how is the 'public unease and distrust' heard?

> Technoscientific issues can go to the heart of what a country is concerned about, about what it values, locally or nationally; they must, therefore, be at the heart of science policy for that country. The … four case studies trace out indicators of engagement with science and technology, especially those that demonstrate dialogue, participation and various and wider public involvement.

Murphy works through each issue, seeing how they are playing out, the new allegiances and alliances which have emerged; and how Irish science has engaged (or not) with non-governmental organisations, advocacy, community and wider public perspectives on sociotechnological issues. How do they fit with RRI (Responsible Research and Innovation) engagement processes?

There's more: Cunningham discovers that local audiences want more detail and more involvement in television coverage of science; Sheridan composes an affectionate chapter on Mary Mulvihill, a powerhouse of Irish science journalism; Junker retails his personal experiences and involvement in the early days of science communication and its institutions; and Brunswick traces the genesis of the Science Gallery, through conversations with four of the founding parties.

Modern science communication has emerged as a field of study, a body of practice and a profession. We have seen the birth of interactive science centres, university courses, the first research into science communication, and a growth in employment by research institutions, universities, museums, science centres and industry.

The Irish account adds usefully to this history. The dual nature of the book (personal anecdote and research) makes it an uneven read, but there's value here. It would be interesting to compare the Irish experience with countries with comparable features — say, New Zealand, Singapore, and the Scandinavian countries — to explore how their pathways have tracked.

References

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Toss Gascoigne was elected the inaugural President of the Scientific Committee of the Network for the Public Communication of Science and Technology, at the ninth international PCST Conference in Seoul in 2006.
His publications on science communication issues include chapters in publications "When Science becomes Culture" (University of Ottowa Press, 1994); "Communicating Science in Social Contexts" (Springer, 2008); "Communicating

European Research" (Springer, 2007); "At the Human Scale" (Science Press Beijing, 2012) and "Science Communication in the World" (Springer, 2012).
He has written articles for journals, on subjects ranging from "Is science communication a discipline?", to studies on the attitude of scientists to the media, on the way journalists regard scientists, and on the history of science communication in Australia.
Based in Australia, he works at the interface between politics, science and the media. He served as Executive Director for three national organisations over the last 15 years: the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS); the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS); and Australian Science Innovations (ASI).
He is a Visiting Scholar, Australian National Centre for the Public Awareness of Science at the Australian National University, and continues to write and to train scientists to improve their skills at dealing with the media and public speaking. He has run hundreds of workshops throughout Australia and internationally in conjunction with Jenni Metcalfe.
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