



Challenge and opportunity for science communication in post-COVID world: the IAMCR 2022 Suzhou Pre-conference

Reviewed Conference

IAMCR 2022 SUZHOU PRE-CONFERENCE,
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Reviewed by

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Abstract

Aiming to address various fundamental questions regarding science communication solutions to a polarized post-COVID-19 world, the IAMCR 2022 Suzhou Pre-conference was held from 8 to 10 July 2022. More than 300 delegates gathered online to discuss a variety of topics related to science communication and public engagement with science in a post-COVID-19 world. With its focus on China, alongside the involvement of leading scholars from around the world, the conference provided an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that shape science communication, and societal responses to science, in different country contexts.

Keywords

Public engagement with science and technology; Public understanding of science and technology; Science communication: theory and models

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As the first large-scale international academic conference on science communication held in China since COVID-19, the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) 2022 Suzhou Pre-conference, held 8 to 10 July 2022, demonstrated how an online event could spark debates and discussions.

The event aimed to address questions regarding science communication solutions that are pertinent in a polarized, post-COVID-19 world. More than 300 communication scholars and graduate students reported on more than 120 studies at the three plenary and 20 parallel sessions. They included how to design science communication solutions in a severely polarized post-pandemic society, how to engage the public with science through social media, and how to tackle the

multiple science communication research opportunities that COVID-19 has presented.

The event was organized by the School of Communication, Soochow University in partnership with Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), Suzhou Association for Science and Technology, IAMCR Environment, Science and Risk Working Group, and Science Communication Committee of Chinese Society for S&T Journalism.

Concerning the effect of scientific literacy on how people respond to science information, participants generally agreed that individuals' social identities, mental models and motivated reasoning, sociopolitical context, and information features all influence how they respond to scientific messages. Professor Bruce Lewenstein (Cornell University) explored whether people with higher scientific literacy were better able to cope with COVID-19. He emphasized that we must move beyond COVID-19 as a case study to universal knowledge about science communication, drawing on what we know about health and risk communication.

Professor Ayelet Baram-Tsabari (Technion, Israel Institute of Technology) pointed out that, although scientific literacy is generally believed to play an essential role in public decision-making, empirical evidence shows that culture and experience play a crucial role when individuals decide about scientific issues.

Concerning the effects of socio-cultural factors in a time of crisis, nine scholars from Soochow University's Science Communication Research Center, led by professors Hepeng Jia and Guoyan Wang, jointly reported on a series of empirical explorations. They analyzed how China's unique cultural, political, and organizational characteristics have shaped Chinese citizens' anti-COVID-19 behaviors. These studies found that collectivism, nationalism, and altruism were critical influencing factors of health behavior in the context of Chinese culture. Furthermore, nationalism became a conscious expression of the public about COVID-19 vaccination through social media such as Douyin (Chinese version of Tiktok) and Weibo.

Stefania Vicari (Sheffield University) explored public engagement with health issues on digital media and appealed to delegates to pay attention to broader socio-cultural dynamics, the norms of social media platforms and the shift of social media's functionalities over time. Professor Yang Shen (Tsinghua University) presented his views on how Metaverse will affect the development of science communication in terms of its theoretical basis and practical application, presenting significant new challenges along the way.

A plenary panel discussion titled 'Science communication journals: addressing academic opportunities in a post-COVID-19 world' invited editors of major international and Chinese science communication journals to discuss how science communication journals deal with issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The panel included Hans Peter Peters, editor of *Public Understanding of Science* (PUS), Susanna Priest, editor of *Science Communication* (participated in written form), Marina Joubert, associate editor of *Journal of Science Communication*, Nian Zheng, executive editor of *Studies on Science Popularization*, Rongting Zhou, executive editor of *Science Communication and Science Education*, and Xuan Liu, editorial director of *Cultures of Science*.

Peters believed that the significant increase in the number and quality of submissions to journals like PUS indicated that science communication within the general communication field had gained significance and importance. However, Priest pointed out that although the pandemic has created an opportunity for innovation in communication theory, there weren't enough original research methods and novel themes. Most submitted papers remain focused on studying classical variables such as the perception and behaviour of individuals, scientific literacy, political orientation, and trust in science. When talking about the mode of science communication during COVID-19, Peters argued that the COVID-19 pandemic communication was, in fact, a backlash against public engagement because forcible public health measures had to be adopted without thorough debates. Joubert argued that, during a time of crisis, it was necessary to provide people with information as quickly as possible, but that this had to be followed up by opportunities for dialogue in order to understand and respond to concerns, misunderstandings and expectations.

Another panel discussion echoed one of the conference themes, namely the tension between science communication practice and research. The debate began with an interesting question from Professor Jia: how can we make better use of existing knowledge about how to improve science communication practice? Professor Dominique Brossard (University of Wisconsin-Madison) stressed the need for interdisciplinary collaboration to move things forward. Margaret Kaseje (Association of Schools of Public Health in Africa) added that new social science research findings had not been disseminated effectively, so the end users sometimes were not able to implement findings. Jennifer Metcalfe (president of PCST Network), emphasized that collaboration between social science researchers and practitioners had to be a process of mutual learning and respect. Professor Li Liu (University of Science and Technology of China) noted the value of strong coordination by powerful organizers to promote cooperation between communication researchers and practitioners.

At the closing ceremony, Professor Jianbin Jin (Tsinghua University) presented the seven best conference papers. Among them, Wanheng Hu from Cornell University examined the visions of citizens' ideal practices regarding technoscientific affairs in a democratic society. Peige Cai and Qilai Wu, both from the University of Science and Technology of China, verified the potent power of citizen science in the Chinese context. Yuanyuan Wu from the National University of Singapore and co-authors investigated the politically motivated nature of COVID-19 conspiracy theories. The awarded studies, among others, clearly reflected the diversified development of science communication scholarship and new challenges it faces, according to Jin.

In his closing address, conference chair Professor Jia, reflected on the development of public engagement with science in China over the past decade. Despite significant advances in the field, he pointed out that the ideal of public engagement, i.e., a constructive dialogue that involves the public in decision-making, has not yet been achieved. Citing recent research on the details of science communication in China, from scientists' reliance on their organizations to the consequences of polarized attitudes and the introduction of the concept of citizen science communicators, Jia called for an alternative research plan to broaden our understanding of the unique processes of science communication in

the non-Western world.

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