

## Comment

# The frontiers of dialogue

**Paola Rodari**

*Dialogue*: it is the trendy word of the moment. It can be found in the EU funding calls (together with “participation” and “governance”), in the works by science communication experts (as opposed to “top-down”), in the proposals of reform plans of scientific education for children, young people, as well as adults (together with “free-choice learning” and “life-long learning”), in the mission statement of new science centres (with “scientific citizenship”). It can also be found in the speeches given by politicians and scientists, when they talk about global problems (e.g. sustainable development, health, etc.), but also about local and very specific ones, e.g. transport infrastructures, waste disposal, the industrial plants existing in a local area.

Therefore it is an all-encompassing “dialogue” – citizens/experts/decision-makers – to jointly manage scientific and technological progress, to devise an active learning method in schools, to build an effective (dialogic) communication between media and publics, to manage local crisis, such as the one Italy has experienced when planning the high speed railway route between Turin and Lyon (but probably similar examples can be found in any country).

In a knowledge-based society, everybody agrees that dialogue is indispensable. Many things have been said on this issue, but we want to quote the meaningful words of the European Commission, which refer to the science-society dialogue not as a desirable yet unnecessary activity, but as a proper and necessary progressive enlargement of the places and themes of democratic life:

«The Commission is committed to improving transparency and consultation between administrations and civil society [...] If citizens and civil society are to become partners in the debate on science, technology and innovation in general and on the creation of the European Research Area in particular, it is not enough to simply keep them informed. They must also be given the opportunity to express their views in the appropriate bodies.» (Science and society action plan, European Commission, DG Research, 2006),

However, the risk is to use “dialogue” as a magic word that – repeatedly mentioned – is able to guarantee some funds or to create a good impression, but which is not followed by consistent – and especially effective – action, as it is not supported by suitable theoretical and methodological instruments.

Maybe it is time to take a step forward, to analyse what is really meant by dialogue in science communication, to speculate on the purposes, the practices and the criteria to evaluate its effectiveness. And, most of all, to exchange these thoughts, which are often rich and detailed but do not cross the borders of a discipline or of a geographical territory.

Hence, Jcom wanted to ask some science communication experts ‘what is it really meant by *dialogue*’? What are the theoretical foundations, the practical opportunities, but also the limitations and, most of all, the possible risks of *dialoguing*?

Luisa Massarani, from Brazil, tell us about the dialogue stakeholders, reminding us not to forget children and adolescents. When diseases such as HIV/AIDS are highly widespread in the social fabric – only to quote one of the examples from her paper – “building a glass bell around children not only is naive”, but it is also “disrespectful of the children’s ability to understand complex issues and to face a dialogue on that type of themes.” The same may be said about any public: when the impact of science and technology permeates society, there is not a public that can legitimately and sensibly be excluded from the debate.

Dialogue can take place everywhere, but obviously one of its preconditions is that there are different players, and a contact among different communities. In the time of the “waste emergency” in Campania, Luigi Amodio (Città della Scienza of Naples) tells us that the local science centre, the Neapolitan paper

“Il Mattino”, the University and the citizens have launched an exchange of information and opinions, an example of good practices.

Lynn Tran, from California, gives us a theoretical interpretation of the term *dialogue*, in its educational meaning. Dialogue, indeed, does mean *exchange*, yet as an exchange it is a mutual enrichment: so, no form of talking is pointless; on the contrary, even the apparently casual talking of the visitors to a museum gives a meaning to the world, which means learning.

Dialoguing, maintains Giancarlo Sturloni, does not mean extinguishing real conflicts, which do exist and cannot be erased by a dialogue/make-up operation. On the contrary, through a process similar to Socratic dialogue, discussion can make people able to educate themselves and then to express an opinion, as informed as possible. Finding a solution acceptable to all the stakeholders, that is something else.

Stefano Sandrelli also illustrates a possible risk of the current dialogic trend. If our society cannot develop in compliance with sustainable models, if our ‘product’ – science – is not interesting and does not meet the tastes of the time, would not *dialogue* be only another effort to make a product attractive, even though it has already been condemned by the market?

Finally, Nico Pitrelli highlights an issue which is anything but marginal. The ability to create occasions for dialogue or in general to build dialogue formats in the different realms of science communication does not stem from innate talent. It is a professional skill that wants training: but how, and when?

These are the first answers, or the first suggestions, for a discussion (alas! still a dialogue) that obviously cannot stop here, but hopefully will continue on this pages.