

Hidden benefits of public participation

We should recognise them, say **Edward Andersson** and **Karin Gavelin**

Debates about the value of public engagement in science tend to centre around what it adds to science and science policy. We believe that policy impact is only half the story. There are many other, indirect benefits of public engagement that tend to go unnoticed because people do not know to look out for them.

Impacts on individuals

Involve's research has repeatedly shown that public engagement can have a profound effect on the individuals involved, be they decision-makers, public participants or 'experts'.¹ The simple act of scientists, civil servants and members of the public sitting down to a face-to-face discussion challenged the preconceptions these people had about each other and about the role that science plays in society.

The experience gave many public participants a new outlook on science, a new appreciation of scientists and their work and, for some, new confidence to take part in public debates. For many scientists, hearing the public participants' questions and insights gave them a new perspective on their work and prompted reflections on their social responsibilities as scientists. As one scientist said: '[the public participants] had ideas and concerns that I had never thought of before.'

Changing specific cultures

These impacts are limited in that they only affect the people directly involved. But they do have a role to play in changing the culture of science and policy communities.

As more and more scientists and civil servants gain personal experiences of public dialogue, these activities contribute to bringing about a wider shift in how the social dimensions of science and technology are addressed. This change is evident in

how social and environmental considerations now take centre stage in discussions about new science and technology, and in how public engagement has gone from being a niche pursuit to become a core element of science governance, championed by government, research councils and the learned societies alike.

Benefit for communities

Apart from these benefits for science, Involve has found that these activities can also have positive impacts for communities and citizens more generally. We have seen citizens involved becoming more scientifically aware and more interested in taking part in discussions about science and public policy elsewhere, as these quotes illustrate: 'I learnt to be more tolerant of other people. To research more on the internet. To be more aware of the environment.' 'I would love to get involved more. Everybody has a brain, everybody can utilise it, therefore everybody should have a voice.'

Good public dialogue can give participants new knowledge and skills and enable them to form opinions about complex science and policy issues. Ten out of eleven participants we interviewed said that they would want to get involved in a similar project again, given the chance.

Building communities

These 'second order' impacts of public engagement are increasingly noticed and emphasised by commentators and policy makers alike.

Lessons from outside of the science engagement field² show that one of the most effective ways of building positive relationships between people is to motivate and enable them to come together to address shared problems and build on what they have in common. Community relations benefit from people being encouraged to take part in public life within their local area, and there is no reason why this should not also be the case for public engagement in science.

Better recognition of second-order impacts could help scientists and policy makers appreciate the indirect and long-term benefits of their public engagement activities. It is time to broaden the scope of the impacts we are looking for.

1 Involve (2007). *Democratic Technologies? Involve (2007). Engage for Change: the role of public engagement in climate change policy.* Involve (2008). *Everybody Needs Good Neighbours? A study of the link between public participation and community cohesion*

2 Involve (2008). *Everybody Needs Good Neighbours?*



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Tales from the water cooler

Barrie Cadshaw reveals the goings-on in the public engagement with science community

Jack Stilgoe has left his senior research post at the thinktank DEMOS to join his former colleague James Wilsdon in the recently established Science Policy Centre at the Royal Society.

Annette Smith leaves the British Science Association after a staggering thirteen years' hard labour which has seen her evolve from Regional Officer in the North West to Director of Regions at head office. Annette takes up the post of Chief Executive of the Association for Science Education. Its former CEO, Derek Bell, is now Director of Education at the Wellcome Trust.

John Davidson, Chief Press Officer at the Medial Research Council, is to be Head of Communications at the brand new UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation. The brainchild of four of the world's leading biomedical research organisations – Cancer Research UK, University College London, the Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust – UKCMRI will be based near the British Library in London and will find new ways to treat diseases such as cancer, tuberculosis, influenza and malaria

Ecsite UK, the UK network of science and discovery centres, has moved from London to Bristol. We have it on very good authority that further changes including a name change for Ecsite UK may also be in the offing (there's a lot of it about).

MOVERS.....

AND SHAKERS....

There were plenty of vibrations at the Association of British Science Writers' AGM in January where the whole furore of the 'Life on Mars' story was discussed. EurekAlert! had banned the Sun newspaper's access to embargoed material following a scoop by journalist Paul Sutherland. (If you missed the controversy check out absw.blogspot.com). The ABSW has responded to the saga by scheduling a session at the 6th World Conference of Science Journalists in London, in late June, focussing on the whole thorny issue of 'Embargoes: Friend or Foe?'

Further eruptions have taken place at the *Times* with the discontinuation of its *Body & Soul* supplement as its Saturday edition, under new editorial control, undergoes a revamp. Some factions of the science media fear that the change will mean the *Times* losing some of its key science features. This echoes worries that were voiced at the British Science Association's Science Communication Conference last year following science correspondent Nic Fleming losing his job at the *Telegraph*. Are we entering a period of erosion and despair for the UK science journalist? – a painful process that US journalists at the American Association for the Advancement of Science's annual meeting say is prevalent in the USA.

On the other hand, it was whispered in our ear that the BBC is poised to bring back its flagship science and technology programme *Tomorrow's World*. Those of a certain age will remember TW showing them for the first time a breathalyser, ATM, calculator, CD and personal stereo. In its heyday – it ran for 38 years – it was essential viewing for many to wonder at the future gadgetry that modern technology could bring us. But the horse's mouth tells us that our informant is not strictly accurate. The nice lady at the BBC tells us that TW is not in fact returning to BBC One. 'We are currently in the advanced stages of planning for a new science show,' she says, 'but it's too early to confirm any further details. Further information will be announced soon.' Watch this space!

Finally...

Applause to fewer moving and shaking, and more wobbly, bits as Chris Smith of Naked Scientists fame is this year's worthy winner of the Royal Society Kohn Award for excellence in engaging the public with science.



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