

## Small Talk working lunch Thursday 26 January 2006



Two main issues were discussed:

- Who are the science communication community?
- What are the barriers to dialogue?

### WHO ARE THE SCIENCE COMMUNICATION COMMUNITY?

A wide-ranging discussion touched on the following points and issues. A consensus was not reached in every case.

The science communication community is:

- broad aggregation of groups (including the media)
- overlap of other communities e.g. policy, education but includes some “specific” science communicators
- the community which debates issues such as “*What is science communication?*”
- there is a sense of community through [psci-com](#) email discussion list - the only list that covers everything; also sense of community through the [Science Communication Conference](#).

It was noted that:

- the community has no clear leadership
- “science communication” has become “science in society” – is this what everyone wants?
- has been steady change in the field over about 20 years, though the causes of this are hard to pinpoint
- certain jobs can now *only* be advertised on [psci-com](#), i.e. community has found a niche
- does part of the change in the field reflect change in society?
- are policy makers genuinely interested in science communication? (maybe!)
- media and policy have become separated from the core community
- some groups missing from the community are teachers and scientists

### BARRIERS TO DIALOGUE

The following issues were deemed, from personal experience, to be barriers to genuine dialogue:

- **Audience:** last minute cancellations/ no-shows
- **Literature:** can be hard to market dialogue
- **New methodology:** science communicators still learning how “to do dialogue”; but have to do it to learn to do it!
- **Time:** some dialogue processes require longer time commitment than traditional events

- **Subject:** some issues encourage dialogue, e.g. “fertility” easier than “nanotechnology”  
- nanotechnology is less focussed, tangible or curriculum-tailored
- **Basis of knowledge:** easier to discuss “neuroscience” than “nanotechnology” as everyone can relate to brain issues; more nebulous topics can make people feel stupid
- **Trust:** of science and scientists
- **Scientists:** may be unwilling to speculate about developing area of research
- **Questions:** need to ask the right ones
- **Relevance:** nanotechnology has less of a *hook*; what do the audience get out of the dialogue? what will we do with the results?
- **Defining:** how open do you keep the debate? need some direction to the discussion but want to discuss the science *and* the applications; need to find *hooks* as can end up with the same end results every time e.g. we need more regulation
- **Need for activity/scenario:** need to learn how to frame the questions; positive experiences include repeating events or using one event to shape the next though many events come to same conclusions e.g. regulation/control