

The poor relation now? The challenge of the public understanding of the Arts and Humanities

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Let me start with some questions:

- Is humanities research harder to communicate broadly than scientific research?
- Does the fact that a lot of humanities research has a less obviously defined end-point than (some of) science make a difference?
- Is the culture of willingness to play the media game different between humanities and science?

At one point humanities were considered the basis for a 'proper' education and science a 'latecomer' (a one point the British Empire was thought to be run by Classicists and historians!). Now, Science generally seen as offering tangible 'truths' and the Humanities providing educated 'opinions'. The humanities are generally perceived as areas of knowledge which require little or no expertise to access – part of the 'already known'. The sciences, by contrast, have established themselves in the public arena as serious, complex fields requiring highly specific expertise, which can nonetheless be made comprehensible to the lay person.

Under pressure from government to improve recruitment, Science and scientists have undertaken an intensive programme to raise public awareness. Promoting what was called 'public understanding' has become a recognised (and long-standing) activity within science and there are a number of related bodies which have been established specifically for this purpose (BA, COPUS etc) There are even Fellowships offered to encourage this. For example, the BA provides funding for scientists to undertake work placements at the BBC to

improve their media skills. Some of the research councils offer media training workshops. These are things that the AHRB is now actively considering.

The AHRB is, relatively speaking, very young in comparison with the Research Councils (in 4th year) and activities of this nature are now under development. The need to disseminate research outcomes is incorporated into the Terms & Conditions of our research awards and is also made explicit in our mission statement. Essentially, however, the sciences have a 'mature' relationship with the general public in a way which researchers in the humanities do not. Nor are humanities researchers used to relating the benefits of their research to a wider audience in comparison with the scientific community. (Partly due to the tradition of lone scholarship compared to the collaborative enterprises of the scientists but also due to the support which the sciences have received via the research councils and the communication programmes they have developed).

In short, I would not say that humanities research is harder to communicate than scientific research but our community is less experienced in this and researchers have far fewer resources to support them in this.

While you may pick up a paper almost any day of the week and find stories which relate to the arts and humanities, what we see far less frequently is reference to the research which underpinned the story or narrative. As a community, we need to communicate the importance of the humanities research agenda to help in understanding research outcome.

Some areas of the humanities do much better than others in terms of communicating with a wider audience – I'm thinking here of the proliferation of history programmes on TV. I think the reason for their success is the clear narrative line which they can offer means that they translate easily to a broadcast (or indeed, print) medium. Archaeology has also been 'exploited' in this way, partly because it can use techniques taken from the thriller or detective novel. There are, of course, difficulties here as some academics believe popularisation inevitably results in dumbing down – and many are hostile to utilitarian arguments.

Defined 'end points'.

The arts and humanities provide the foundation for the cultural heritage and tourism industries, which in the UK constitute a large and rapidly growing economic sector. It is this 'foundation' which we need to emphasise and we need to explain how it contributes to tangible outcomes.

The contribution which Arts and humanities research makes to the creative and cultural industries seems rather more obvious but sometimes the research element seems to get overlooked. Our work in monitoring and evaluation will go some way to addressing this issue but the information he obtains will need to be appropriately presented to ensure that it is understood and picked up by the media, which act as the gatekeeper to the general public

Often the way in which to place seemingly esoteric 'end points' or research outcomes in context is to provide them with a relevant narrative. One example: a funded research project with the title: 'The Morphosyntactic Typology of Romani Dialects: Database Enhancement Project'. Not a headline grabber. If, however, it is made plain the wider context in which such research takes place – the collection (and 'saving') of a language which has little or no written tradition, the validation this can provide for an ethnic group who are often ignored or disapproved of by state authorities, etc – then the research has meaning for a wider audience. A not inconsiderable part of the AHRB's role is that of translator. I do not use the metaphor of translation lightly: it is important to remember that any translation modifies the text that it is transferring into another discourse and that the receiver of the translation returns it to the translator again modified through the prism of his/her own discourses. The act of translation is an essentially dynamic one, and this dynamism, this semantic mobility and even instability can be used creatively – if advisedly - when speaking of research.

Also... traditionally, a study of the humanities was seen as a civilising influence, providing an entrée to a deeper level of understanding and appreciation of culture and the world around us. I think this still holds true – although the descriptive language needs to be updated! But to what extent does study of the

humanities contribute to concepts such as citizenship or engagement with wider social, ethical or aesthetic issues? (I'm thinking of the popularity of the regular AC Grayling feature in The Guardian on Saturday).

We need to contextualise the relevance of research in the arts and humanities and show how it underpins our understanding of science and technology's impact on society – its history, the ethical, legal and social implications. We also need to indicate how it provides us with some of the tools needed to participate in informed and democratic dialogue.

Arts and humanities researchers will, I think, have to learn to become storytellers – to explain how their activities, however seemingly archaic or esoteric, have a direct impact and relevance on our lives today. To do this we have to translate the language of the humanities and ensure that the meaning of research is made relevant to a wider audience. This not so much about willingness; rather it is a question of gaining the kind of confidence that comes from training and experience.