

Engaging engagement

Professional scientists are now much more likely to see public engagement as a key component of their role, and to appreciate the contribution of the public to dialogue.

However, they are wary of simplistic ways of encouraging and measuring public engagement activities, according to the final report of the three-year *Scientists on Public Engagement (SCOPE)* project.¹

The research was conducted by Professor Sarah Franklin, Dr Kevin Burchell and Kerry Holden from the BIOS Centre for the Study of Bioscience, Biomedicine, Biotechnology and Society at the London School of Economics. Professor Franklin told *People & Science*: 'No-one had done this kind of research into scientists' own attitudes to public engagement before... We conducted and analysed 30 semi-structured interviews with biological scientists and found they were very enthusiastic.'

Four wheels good

Dr Burchell said that Professor John Burn of the Institute of Human Genetics at the University of Newcastle memorably summed up the interviewees' attitudes. He told the interviewers: 'Sometimes we have had discussions about whether it is more important to be a good communicator, or a good scientist, or a good clinician, and I just felt like saying, well, which of the four wheels on your car is the most important one?'

New emphases

The researchers also detected a new appreciation among the professional scientists for the role of the public and of their ability to grasp the science. Dr Jolanta Opacka-Juffry from the School of Human and Life Sciences at Roehampton University, for instance, is quoted as saying: 'Well, the public [sees] the bigger landscape... The research community very often sees the details very sharply, [but] forgets about the landscape... That's why public input is needed.'

Encouraging and measuring

The report does, however, flag up scientists' concern that their autonomous, voluntary engagement, could yet be compromised by bureaucracy. Asked about ways of encouraging participation in public engagement activities Dr Chris Boyd, of the Human Genetics Section at the University of Edinburgh, told the report writers: 'I can see the attraction... but what I would find difficult about it is how would you measure it... [As] soon

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as you make it a compulsion... you get the problem of people meeting their targets but not necessarily engaging with it... there should be encouragement for people to engage, but... I'm not sure whether it should be a part of their professional assessment.'

The SCOPE project was funded by the Wellcome Trust.

¹ <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/BIOS/scope/scope.htm>

British Academy

The British Academy is establishing a new policy centre to strengthen its role in public debate and policy-making. President Sir Adam Robert said, 'The major problems that face us today... will not be solved by science and technology alone [but require] an understanding of... the humanities and social sciences.'

Space prize

Space scientist Lucie Green from University College London's Mullard Space Science Laboratory (MSSL) has won the Royal Society Kohn award for her leadership in building up a first-class programme of engagement, communication and outreach projects at the MSSL over ten years.

Good for you?

Science Minister Lord Drayson and doctor/author Ben Goldacre have debated the quality of science reporting. Drayson argued it was 'admirable and improving... when it's written by dedicated science correspondents.' Goldacre criticised journalism for 'eroding the public's understanding of the very basics of evidence-based practice.' Watch online at <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/webcast.html>

UK Science body launches new planet

A new 'planet' website has been launched by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council as part of its IMPACT! campaign to communicate the importance of science to the world around us. It aims to show the public why engineering and the physical sciences are vital for our future. www.impactworld.org.uk

New Darwin Centre at the Natural History Museum

The second phase of the Darwin Centre at the Natural History Museum (NHM) in London has opened for business. The £78 million project includes a stunning new 'Cocoon' - a 65 metre long, eight-storey concrete building, housing millions of insect and plant specimens, alongside 200 of the museum's scientists.

Intertwining functions

Professor Richard Lane, Director of Science at the NHM told *People & Science*, 'The centre has three functions. One is to house the national research collections in the best possible conditions. The second is to give a really good research environment for doing the kind of science that we need in the 21st century, and the third thing is to enhance the public engagement activities of the museum. Those three are intertwined.'

Engaging directly

When *People & Science* visited, the centre was very effectively engaging visitors with the way science is done. Interactive displays featuring four 'scientist guides' at the museum explained how research papers are considered by journals for publication, how

scientists plan field trips to collect specimens and how they identify species of mosquito and work to eradicate malaria, for example. Visitors could also see from the public spaces into the museum's collection and talk to scientists preparing specimens for storage and research.

Scientist guides

One of the scientist guides is beetle curator, Max Barclay. '[When working in the preparation area] a lot of people ask you what you're doing and why you're doing it,' he said. 'That's the bread and butter of it. But occasionally you get some kid who's really, really keen and wants to know how to become an entomologist. You can see yourself twenty or thirty years ago and that's exciting because we need to think about where the next generation of scientists is going to come from.'



© Natural History Museum

Feedback

Lane isn't fazed by one grown-up visitor's online comments that the centre was hard to engage with and not a great exhibit for children. He responded: 'There are other parts of the museum for very young children. In the Darwin Centre we're particularly interested in connecting with children who are beginning to ask lots more questions, maybe about to go to secondary school, because that's the time they tend to lose interest in science.' Max Barclay confirmed this: 'For me the most important things are creating scientifically literate citizens and inspiring the next generation of scientists. I hope we're doing a good job of that.'



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Data sharing

Google Earth has made climate change information accessible through 'layers', so that users can view greenhouse gas emissions by region. A joint Google/Danish Government YouTube channel is also helping the public make its opinions on climate change heard, ahead of the United Nations Climate Change conference in Copenhagen.

<http://www.youtube.com/cop15>

Walking with robots

The EPSRC has awarded a prestigious Senior Media Fellowship to Professor Alan Winfield from the University of the West of England to undertake public engagement work for his robotics research. He explains, 'We have to engage the public so that people can influence what having intelligent robots in their lives will mean.'

www.walkingwithrobots.org

Displaced volume?

The Times has launched a monthly science supplement. 'Eureka sates an appetite for in-depth, elegant coverage of science, health and the environment. It covers the facts - and also the money, power and personalities behind the scenes. We want readers to be enlightened but also challenged,' says staff contributor Anjana Ahuja.

Nullius in verba or Take nobody's word for it

Seven out of ten British adults trust a scientist to tell the truth, according to an Ipsos MORI survey for the Royal College of Physicians. Scientists are less trusted than doctors (92 per cent), teachers (88), professors (80) and the clergy (71) but way ahead of journalists (22) and politicians (13).

<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltmeid=2478>