

**The Science Communication Conference
22nd – 23rd May 2003**

Session 6: Issues involving science that we might communicate

Chair: **Professor Helen Haste, Department of Psychology, University of Bath**

Sir Peter Williams FRS, President of the BA – Back to the future: forecasting the past

In trying to guess which scientific issues might dominate the near future, it is easier to get predictions wrong than right. Even Rutherford, in his famous comment on the prospects for nuclear energy, proved fallible. So let's ask the question "looking back from some point in time, what headlines would have surprised us and what developments would have impacted society in the first decade of the 21st Century?" By projecting ourselves into the year 2010 looking backwards, our imaginations can be given a free rein.

For example, some response in that time frame to the SETI programme from an extragalactic source would certainly have grabbed the attention of the press!! Less spectacularly, though with more likelihood, the search for so-called 'dark matter' might by then have come up with an answer which has eluded science since Einstein as to what the universe really is made of. The general public display a consistent appetite for the fruits of astronomical and astrophysical research, even though the impact on their everyday lives is actually quite minimal.

On the bio-science front, we all anticipate on an almost daily basis right now that we will be confronted with the evidence for – and the ethical consequences of – the first human clone. It would be surprising if such news had not hit the headlines by 2010. More relevant to our everyday lives, as the recent SARS outbreak has

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shown, for all the wonders of modern medicine in the latter half of the 20th century, we remain extraordinarily vulnerable to attacks from a mutating transgenic virus. Is man actually the most successful life form on the planet – or perhaps the virus? Will we see viable treatments emerge by 2010 for HIV, SARS and whatever else nature might throw at us in between?

More prosaically, we grew used in the latter half of the 20th century to technological breakthroughs, transforming fundamental science into high street products, which totally changed our lives, but were usually taken for granted. What will the next decade hold in store? Hysteria over self-replicating ‘nanobots’ may have been a touch exaggerated, but there can be little doubt that nanotechnology will yield ‘smart’ products in everything from implantable medical devices to environmental monitoring.

The latter in particular, may well have shown by 2010, in stark unambiguous terms, that confronting and reversing the threat from global warming and climate change presents an even greater challenge to mankind than coping with viruses.

Whatever proves to have been the case, there is no doubt whatsoever that we will look back in 2010 on a decade in which science and technology will have played an ever increasing role in our lives – and hopefully on a decade in which the public’s understanding of these fundamental changes will have advanced significantly.