

What role can the science communication community play in consultations?

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Parallel Workshop at the Science Communication Conference
Savoy Place
22 and 23 May 2003

The workshop explored how the science communication community can be involved at all sorts of levels in consultation processes, ranging from organising a formal consultation process to linking an event to another's consultation.

The workshop began with a brief outline of the experiences of both the British Association and the Royal Institution of different types of consultation. The BA has organised a number of forums to feed into formal consultation procedures such as those on the draft mental health bill (Department of Health), pharmacogenetics (Nuffield Council on Bioethics) and the GM science review (Office of Science and Technology). The Royal Institution has recently organised discussions on food safety and nanotechnology, the latter focusing specifically on whether there should be a public debate/consultation on nanotechnology. Gail and Fiona found they had similar questions and issues about becoming more involved in consultation activities and thought other members of the science communication community might have similar experiences to share.

Delegates were split into four discussion groups. They were asked to share experiences and report back on the following issues:

- i. determining the right time to get involved
- ii. finding out about key reports, draft bills and consultation processes
- iii. dealing with different agendas
- iv. exploring what is realistic for the science communication community to do.

Determining the right time to get involved

Who chooses what is discussed and when? Most people prefer the status quo; if we had spent a great deal of time debating the merits of the car or the telephone before they were built, would we have got the most out of them? When an area of science or technology is in its infancy it can be difficult to get wide participation in events and as crises evolve or after their peak different methods of consultation and debate will be needed. The workshop participants noted that it is important to find out public opinions early on so that concerns can be addressed, and as a crisis evolves more publics should be consulted.

Lord Jenkins commented in a previous session that some of the best debates have occurred because a decision had to be taken, citing the debates on stem cell research as examples. Professor Robin Grove-White also suggested two models for agenda setting. In the first model, which is perhaps overly deterministic, scientists and social scientists anticipate risks and sensitivities and set an agenda for discussions based on them. The alternative model allows a new technology time to develop, so that issues such as that of ownership in nanotechnology can be discussed as and when they arise.

However, waiting for a technology to develop would have implications on the delivery of a consultation method because of the lead time required for its organisation and implementation.

Finding out about reports

Perhaps a bigger issue for science communicators wishing to have a greater influence over policy making is how to find out about forthcoming consultations, be they from local or central government or non-governmental organisations. Central government publishes a list of consultations on their CitizenSpace website (<http://www.ukonline.gov.uk/CitizenSpace/CitizenSpace/fs/en>) for the duration of the 12 week consultation period and afterwards. However, this information is of little use to science communicators who need greater notice if they are to organise relevant events. Information on consultations by non-governmental organisations is harder to find, mostly being passed on by word of mouth. More could be done within the science communication community to circulate information regarding forthcoming consultations, perhaps via email alerts to established networks.

dealing with different agendas

Effective stage management of consultation events is the key to ensuring that all participants get the chance to be heard regardless of their prior beliefs.

Elements of effective stage management include:

- being clear about the aims and objectives of the consultation in advance and ensuring that all participants are aware of them;
- using neutral, unthreatening venues, since the grandeur or associations of particular venues, such as the Royal Society premises, can be daunting;
- allowing people greater freedom by recording comments anonymously; and
- ensuring good meeting facilitation and chairing
- be aware of people's biases (organisers, scientists, participants, government etc).

what is realistic?

Ultimately the goal of the science communication community should be to make it normal for scientists and 'lay' experts to engage in debates over ethical and social issues in science. However, realistically the impact we can make depends on the aims, timescale and resources allocated to science communication activities. Working together and sharing experience will give the science communication community a much more powerful voice. Suggestions were made for more 'quick and dirty' consultations and debates such as those at science festivals or science centres; the same topic could be used at a variety of locations at different times allowing experience to be shared within the community. Better communication and networking between the science communication community and research councils, the OST and universities to highlight topics for discussion was also seen as critical to getting the most out of the resources available. New grants available from the OST, and described in their recent consultation paper, could effectively be used to address this.

conclusions

The workshop's lively discussions produced suggestions for ways to move forward. There was a sense that workshop delegates wanted to work together as a community to enable their activities and programmes to have more of an impact on policy makers. To make this happen it was suggested a network is established for science communicators interested in consultations processes to post dates and information on formal consultations and share good practice.