

Things can only get better

Ian Gibson is gloomy

As another general election approaches, I dread the consequences for science, technology and engineering. Forgive me if I appear cynical but the road from 1997 until 2009 has, despite, achievements in doubling science budgets, student stipends, building new laboratories and so on, left much more to do to win public support and push the government's commitments to science, technology and engineering much higher on its agenda.

Still distrust

Many scientists do not wish to address these issues given they are completely immersed in research assessment exercises, publications, grant awards, running their laboratories and so on. Science is neutral and divorced from the 'black arts of politics'. Since 1992 societies, individuals, the media, politicians and many other groupings have tried to captive public support and can point to a sea-change in activities in this area.

The science community was badly damaged by the saga of genetic modification of plants and by other issues like the cervical cancer vaccination and the previous one of triple MMR jobs. The public has reacted in hostile ways. I fear that, despite the millions of pounds ploughed into public understanding of science, and the positive polls about trust in science, there is a distrust in science which can flare up on specific issues. There is a lingering confusion about whether science is 'good' or 'bad' even if it is the use of the technology which is the essential debate.

Misreporting

A recent poll carried out by Ipsos MORI for the Royal College of Physicians found that seven out of ten British adults trusted scientists to tell the truth. Politicians sharply contrasted with this where 13 per cent of the people trusted them. Even journalists reach a higher figure than this. And yet!! The media

can still produce headlines like 'Why eating just one sausage a day raises your cancer risk by 20 per cent'.¹ Five sausages and cancer is therefore guaranteed!

The recent headlines on cancer jobs has shown how science reporting, despite improvements in some newspapers, can easily misrepresent. This is still part of the 2009 story. All the current talk of impacts of science, commercialisation of science and the role of venture capital indicates a move away from basic research which may or may not have immediate practical applications.

Science for industry

Science is to be done in the interests of the Treasury and a few government ministers. Where is the public in all of this? How many members of the public sit on the deliberative committees of the research councils, societies etc? What will 2010 bring to public understanding of science or science's understanding of the public?

As the few scientists, I mean those who have practised it and published in peer reviewed journals, leave parliament it is left to the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology to educate the MPs. I wonder how many will turn up? Who cares, anyway? Policy is top-down which will ensure that we will not see a science for the people but a science for industry.

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Science will never achieve what it can until there is an understanding of the needs of people in the roles science and technology might play – in health knowledge, caring services, the environment, astronomy and many more areas based on reliable evidence. Until this revolution the public will have its views fashioned by the dailies. This, despite the growing signs in 2009 that more young people are fascinated by science but prefer to opt for other subjects.

¹ Daily Mail online 31 March 2008 : <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-550729/Why-eating-just-sausage-day-raises-cancer-risk-20-cent.html>



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Tales from the water cooler

Barrie Cadshaw reveals who and what has been moving and shaking in public engagement

Mover

Nigel Eady, the British Science Association's Science in Society Officer, has left the Association to take up the position of Programme Manager with the Academy of Medical Sciences.

Nigel began his career at the Association back in January 2005 as an intern. After a successful career at the bench, he wanted to sample life in public engagement. There was a time when 'intern' meant Monica Lewinsky, but these days it seems to be the way for those with an interest in public engagement to dip their toes in the water.

In at the beginning

I am happy to report that, despite the credit crunch the *Times* launched *Eureka* in October. It is billed as a new monthly magazine covering science, life and the environment, and is the first dedicated monthly science magazine of any national newspaper. The first edition included a piece on 'landmarks in the history of *Times* scientific coverage' which was headed up by '1831: Coverage of the first meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science'.

The British Science Festival, as it's now called, continues to enjoy huge support not only from the *Times* but the print, broadcast and online media in general. Following this year's Festival, *Guardian* science correspondent Ian Sample reported on their Science Weekly podcast that the most surprising thing to report from this year's event was that the Festival was not at all bad (!). He went on to enthuse about the stories he'd got out of it.

Barely superhuman

This year's Festival might have had some slightly risqué coverage had a rumoured event actually taken place. I hear – from a very reliable source – that Robert Winston and Jim Al-Khalili were prepared to strip for science! Spurred on by a little peer pressure (Marcus du Sautoy and John Krebs), they were on the cusp of taking part in Exploring the Invisible (<http://bioproject.tumblr.com>). It uses bioluminescent bacteria to light slow capture photography of the naked human form. The effect gives an eerie blue superhuman quality to the subject.

The Wellcome Trust-funded project – a collaboration between artist Anne Brodie, microbiologist Simon Park and curator Caterina Albano – is planned to culminate in a temporary installation at the Old Operating Theatre in London.

Anne and Simon were at the Festival with their mobile booth photographing Festival goers on the Saturday. Although Robert and Jim did go in search of the booth the following day – it had vanished – the bioluminescent properties of the bacteria had sadly degenerated overnight. Robert and Jim were reportedly looking somewhat relieved.

Brain shaker

Our very own Howie Firth is asking us questions way above our pay grade. Divining our support for Simon Singh's campaign to reform the libel laws, he wants to know how legislation should be framed to exempt scientists from the laws of libel. Would we advocate exemption for everyone who has a science degree, or would it be restricted to a particular category, whether heads of research institutions or authors of science books?

All we know is that disputes which belong in scientific journals should not be pursued through the laws of libel.

Perhaps the shining intellectual calibre of the British Science Association's Moray and Highlands branch, which Howie chairs, has led him to expect that we might be able to answer his probing questions. Perhaps we should hire a lawyer...

To support Simon Singh and the Keep Libel Laws out of Science campaign log on to www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/project/333/

Do get in touch if you hear any tales at the water cooler that you'd like us to include in the next edition of *People & Science*.



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