"The future is now" a European perspective on the future of science communication

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"*The future is now*" — a European perspective on the future of science communication

Reviewed Conference
THE FUTURE OF SCICOMM 2.0
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Reviewed by
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Abstract
The Future of SciComm 2.0 conference was a one-day event in Brussels on April 26th 2022. Focusing on the future of European science communication, sixty participants from twelve countries with different expertise discussed the current challenges and possible solutions for the field. Key themes centred around disinformation, communicating global challenges, evidence-based practices and institutional structures woven through the plenary opening, afternoon workshops and the closing public panel discussion. The conclusion is a need for an European science communication ecosystem that is transdisciplinary, connected and cooperative in practice, weaving between policy, research and industry. Finally, citizen science and open science could be included as scholarly praxes to facilitate societal interconnectivity.

Keywords
Professionalism, professional development and training in science communication; Public engagement with science and technology; Science and policy-making

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Introduction

The Future of SciComm 2.0 was organised by the German organization *Wissenschaft im Dialog* (WiD) and the Europea-wide *All European Academies* as a follow up to the virtual *Future of SciComm Conference* in 2021[1] which attracted over 1,000 participants globally. This smaller in-person event focused on the European perspective, attracting sixty participants from twelve countries and included practitioners (15), researchers (12), a policy maker, funders (3), businesses (3) and others. The gender balance was 65% female to 35% male. Ethnicity data was not available.

[1] https://www.wissenschaft-im-dialog.de/en/our-projects/future-of-science-communication-conference/about-the-conference/.

The conference aimed to further the network (and community) of European-based science communication. The main organisers, WiD and ALLEA, proposed the conference could restart EU communities, especially considering the ongoing learnings of the corona pandemic. The conference looked into the relevance of scientific knowledge and science communication for society but also the way that shapes citizens' decision making and policy. Another key aim was to improve the relationship between science-public-media-policy in Europe.

While national structures for science communication practice are stabilising and science communication research has moved from a niche field to an established multidisciplinary research domain, the divide between practice and research remains vast. Ways to bridge this divide, and to promote more evidence-based science communication were also discussed.

Opening plus impulse talks

Brief introductions by Antonio Loprieno (ALLEA), Birte Fähnrich (German Federal Ministry of Education and Research) and Markus Weißkopf (WiD) sketched the importance of science communication, the pitfalls and how the field is not as evidence-based as it should be.

The three impulse talks that followed offered different perspectives on science communication. Infectious diseases specialist Erika Vlieghe and communication officer Uwe Steger reflected on challenges that they faced during the pandemic and lessons learned, including the limits of multidisciplinary research and the need for quality assured science communication. Sociologist Massimiano Bucchi revealed at the beginning of his talk *Distrustful and misinformed? Ideological stereotypes of citizens in science communication* that the answer to his question is: No, the public is not distrustful and misinformed. Bucchi showed substantial evidence for this and highlighted the irony that there is considerable misinformation about misinformation. He hypothesized that the ineffective deficit stereotype of citizens as vessels to be filled with information, is so strong, since it shifts the blame to the media instead of institutions, exempting scientific institutions from improving the quality of science communication.

Themed workshops

Described as the 'centre piece', bringing the impulse talks into dialogue with participants', questions and workshop recommendations are summarised below, and will inform a policy paper:

Fake news & disinformation (and the consequences for the science-(communication)-community). How do we develop a common language? What quality criteria could ensure images and text are not misleading? How can we ensure spoken and written language are accessible?

Communicating global challenges (learning from COVID-communication and climate change). Set up local information hubs to share and exchange reliable information. Stratify audiences by risk to tailor key information via trusted knowledge sources within specific local communities. Offer probabilistic scenarios and roadmaps to address public uncertainty and act accordingly.

Evidence-based practice, impact and evaluation of science communication. An EU hub could connect people to use quality science communication research advice and best practice. Key recommendations:

- Researcher science communication training
- Measure science communication impact, including on industry
- Encourage transparency of communicators' motives

Networks and institutional structures of European science communication. Whilst useful, networks and sites of exchange require strategic approaches and sustainable funding. Annual gatherings could build this strategy, breaking out of silos, integrating science communication within science and offer clearer science communication definitions. Citizen science and open science could be included alongside science journalism.

Panel discussion

Livestreamed via YouTube[2] the panel (see Figure 1) covered institutionalizing European science communication. Moderated by Maria Lindholm from Sweden's Research and Innovation Office in Brussels, the panel comprised David Lodder, Communication officer for Directorate General, Research and Innovation within the European Commission, Svetla Tanova from the European Science Media Hub, Markus Weißkopf of WiD and Science Communication scholar, Ionica Smeets, from Leiden University.

Topics ranged across reward and recognition structures to incentivise scientists to take part, incorporating and responding to community perspectives and embracing storytelling, citizen science and open science to better resonate with public perspectives.

Highlighting trust, strategy and cooperation to enhance impact, David Lodder offered the example of the EU competence centre for Science Communication[3] which aims to encourage cooperation and sharing of best practice.

Svelta Tanova identified the fight for attention on digital platforms, whilst Markus Weißkopf (WiD) called for a shift away from the deficit model towards dialogic science communication strategies developed with the public. Ionica Smeets addressed a key role for arts, humanities and social sciences. A twitter thread from Rick Hall,[4] pointed to libraries, schools and virtual fora, as key spaces for dialogue.

In closing, the panel described the ideal science communication landscape in five years: building a European science communication ecosystem that is connected and cooperative in practice, weaving between policy, research and industry. And, guided by common values, including openness and cooperation with public audiences.

[2]How to institutionalize SciComm in Europe: https://www.wissenschaft-im-dialog.de/projekte/future-of-science-communication-conference/future-of-scicomm-conference-2022/.

[3]A European competence centre for science communication tender information: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/horizon-widera-2022-era-01-60.

[4]https://twitter.com/Rick_Hall/status/1519257720771260416.

Figure 1. The panel at SciComm 2.0: from left to right — Maria Lindholm (Moderator), Ionica Smeets (University of Leiden), David Lodder (European Commission), Svetla Tanova (European Science Media Hub) and Markus Weißkopf (WiD). Image credit © 2022 Horst-Wagner.eu.

Conclusion

The scene was set for a strategic and joined up European approach to science communication. An emerging topic, transdisciplinarity, points to a critical concern: how do we urgently engage the public in the intersecting crises of rising inequality, climate change, biodiversity loss and rapid technological revolution? Quoting Neil LaBute ('Reasons to Be Pretty'), "*The future is now. It's time to grow up and be strong. Tomorrow may well be too late*". Likewise, the European science communication community can strengthen and create long-term structural-support. If not, it might be too late to ensure a long-term engagement between the complex relationships at the science-public-media-policy interface where structural barriers need addressing. Here, new alliances and scholarly praxes are needed for this community to invest in shared planetary futures.

Authors

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