

Report British Science Association Conference 2011 Science Communication Conference 2011 'Online Engagement'

Plenary – 'Future of Science Communication'

Speakers: Professor Kathy Sykes (University of Bristol), Lord Robert Winston (Imperial College London), Paul Manners (National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement)

Report: Alison Cooper – British Science Association Conference Bursary

Brave Moves to Show Belief in Wise Science

The 'tricky' process of financing and cultural embedding of involvement from the public and all areas of research, including Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences in decision making is a major challenge for science communication, requiring brave leadership. Funding, advising government, and linking with communities are critical. There is a need to assess impact of science and technology, including online engagement and learn how to use them 'wisely'.

These conclusions emerged during a debate between an audience of science communicators, and panellists Professor Robert Winston, Professor Kathy Sykes and Paul Manners at the 2011 British Science Association, Science Communication Conference.

Professor Sykes explained the importance of an aim. For her;

"It's about helping people make choices and a mature relationship between science and society so that people from different backgrounds feel they can join in".

Paul Manners stated;

" We need to look at embedding professional respect for the public. While there has been tremendous progress, there is still a long way to go".

Professor Winston emphasised;

"Taking it seriously, given that while communication is a two way process and broadcasting is one way it is surprising that the BBC hasn't done more with online interaction. "

The panel agreed on the important role for Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities.

Professor Sykes explained that the department of Business Innovation and Skills definition of science includes all areas of research and there is a risk of some "falling through cracks". We need Social Science and Arts and Humanities to help solve global problems. Professor Winston agreed that less funding for arts and humanities, is a 'sting in the tail', from seeking funds for science and selling the idea that science is not part of culture is "a huge mistake."

Professor Winston finds it;

“Extraordinary that in the UK every office of government has a science adviser, yet not a single social scientist is measuring and valuing impact. If you can’t trust governments to use science wisely we have to make sure”.

Paul Manners outlined the work of the National Centre for Public Engagement, looking at how to work with universities, community and cultural organisations to make research more accessible.

Building beyond the original six funded ‘beacons of public engagement’, Universities are asked to sign up to a manifesto.

Professor Winston raised concern about standards and need for a seamless transition from school education to university and community engagement;

“The Russell group Universities are traditionally seen as elitist and not interested in communities – that is critical and really has to change”.

Paul Manners noted, “where money is tight Universities may be less inclined to take a risk”.

Professor Sykes instigated a show of hands, sympathising with an audience feeling affected by cuts;

“It is hard to be a brave leader when things are uncertain and it takes a brave leader to say they believe in it.”

On funding she said;

“While embedding is a way forward it is important to stand up to funding panels seeking to cut it. Public engagement is now part of how research is assessed.”

She discussed the experience of public involvement in governance and decision making. While this may be perceived as, ‘threatening’ and ‘tricky’, her colleagues described inclusion of members of the public in a University a discussion forum as; “so much better, it has helped our thinking!”

She referred to ESRC open meetings as “a brave move to experiment with how to involve public interests”, and a key lesson is that there needs to be “a real policy decision to make and a policy maker wanting to hear”.

Professor Winston spoke of a massive need for more collaboration with industry.

“Pharmaceutical Companies get children into research but don’t take part in dialogue. They were silent on animal research and didn’t put their head above parapet.”

In terms of careers, panellists encouraged staying with science.

Professor Winston; “Two things you can do. The best science communicators have real science expertise, which means the public will trust them. Every PhD supervisor should aim for their students to explain even the most technical studentship in three sentences, this shapes their own thinking”.

Professor Sykes; “Network, talk and listen to people, and see yourself as a change agent.”

They concluded with a focus on the future;

Paul Manners; “I am optimistic. It is not predictable. People are getting a sense of what it means to them, we should allow this creativity”.

“We are looking at how the system of engagement can work together, rather than making it complicated, with Science Centres working across boundaries.”

Professor Winston; “Online is the one most powerful technology that will affect the future. We need to look at new technologies particularly interactive ones, proving they have value and really work”.

Professor Sykes; “Mainstreaming is the right direction as long as we don’t rush. Let’s make sure this territory becomes as important as we all believe, in the minds of others not just those in this room.”

(822 words)