

Parallel Session 8: The role of books and literature in public communication of science

SCIENCE, BOOKS AND SOCIETY

Michel Claessens

Head, Information and Communication, Directorate-General for Research, European Commission, 200 rue de la Loi, B-1049 Brussels, Belgium. Tel: +32-2-295-9971, Fax: +32-2-295-8220, E-mail: michel.claessens@cec.eu.int

Abstract

The presentation will outline the European Commission's views on the role of books and literature in the context of the science and society issues. In 2001 the European Commission took an important initiative to stimulate a change in the relationship between science and society, as to reflect the new issues, new fields and new questions that accompany recent scientific and technological developments. Against this background, the publication strategy of the European Commission and concrete examples will be presented.

Key words: Science and society, books

Text

In December 2001 the European Commission proposed and decided to implement a "Science and Society Action Plan". The Commission document set out a new strategy to make science more accessible to European citizens, and 38 actions have been identified as to achieve this objective.

The activities described in the Action Plan are now conducted in close cooperation with all the Member States, and - beyond Europe - with third countries and international organisations. Numerous players are involved: local and regional public authorities, the general public, civil society, industry, etc.

The Commission acts here as a catalyst. It was made clear from the outset that significant results can be expected only if Member States themselves make an all-out effort in a joint, coordinated approach with the Commission.

At the dawn of the 21st century, as the economic integration of an enlarging European Union becomes a tangible reality, our society is faced with the challenge of finding its proper place in a world shaken by economic and political turbulence. Examples abound to show that knowledge, in particular science, technology and innovation, are indispensable to meet this challenge.

However, there are indications that the immense potential of our achievements is out of step with European citizens' current needs and aspirations, such as peace, jobs, security and sustainable development of the planet.

The 2001 and 2003 Eurobarometer Surveys (two opinion polls "[Europeans, science and technology](#)") were conducted at the Commission's request in the fifteen Member States between 10 May and 15 June 2001, and in the ten new

Member States plus Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey in November 2002) of European attitudes to science gives a mixed picture, ranging from confidence and hope to lack of interest in scientific activities or even fears regarding some of their impacts.

80 % of Europeans believe that science will one day conquer diseases such as cancer or AIDS, and scientists enjoy a high level of public confidence, to the extent that 72% of the respondents said they would like politicians more frequently to use expert advice in making their choices. Despite these expectations and the climate of confidence, the same survey also shows that Europe's citizens do not always have a very positive perception of science and technology, and that science is remote for some sections of the population.

Industrial hazards and ethical issues are widely highlighted in the media, raising questions and reinforcing the public's desire for progress to be more closely monitored. Some people feel that science and technology are changing their lives too quickly.

Although progress has been made, too many stereotypes still keep women out of science and deprive it of the diversity sorely needed for a more harmonious contribution to political, social and economic life.

Young people, moreover, no longer find studying science and scientific careers sufficiently attractive. Together with demographic trends, this potentially affects the labour market where industry has difficulties in recruiting the engineers and scientists needed.

Europe would therefore gain by assembling in a Community framework the efforts deployed in the Member States to improve the European public's ability to assess the scientific and technological issues of the day, and to motivate them to become more involved in science.

Against this background, the Commission's action plan presents 38 actions designed to:

- Promote scientific and education culture in Europe
- Bring science policies closer to citizens
- Put responsible science at the heart of policy making

The proposed action plan marked the beginning of a long process, the objective of which is to change the relationship between science and society. Some of the activities are very long term - e.g. in the field of education - while others, such as conferences, are ad hoc.

The European Commission has also set out an ambitious strategy to accompany the implementation of the Action Plan through information and communication activities. A new "Science and society" Directorate has been created within its Directorate-General for Research, now consisting of 6 Units: Strategy and policy, Scientific advice and governance, Ethics and science, Women and science, Information and communication, Education and science.

The European Commission is also committed to help EU-funded projects better communicate and disseminate their research results. It draws in

particular the attention of participants in FP6-funded projects on the fact that they can no longer ignore the ‘public communication’ dimension of their activity and that they are also in an excellent position to improve the image of science and technology among a broad public. Exposing non-specialists to the results of research work helps to improve their understanding of scientific and technological developments and stimulate public debate on important issues, which not only meets a very real social need but also contributes to the success of RTD policy.

Last but not least, publications (hard copies and electronic) have an important role to play. The European Commission’s Research Directorate-General (DG) publishes about 500 publications per year, with a total print-run of over 2.5 million copies. The presentation will outline the Research DG’s publication strategy in this respect and give examples of publications:

Promoting scientific awareness of the public about European research and science and society issues (Fig. 1)

Stimulating public debate about scientific issues

Contributing to science and society issues (e.g. Eurobarometer surveys).

Figure 1

RTD info
Magazine for European Research

- 85,000 copies
- Internet and printed
- 600,000 readers in 140+ countries
- 4 languages: DE, EN, ES, FR
- 3-monthly
- « Service to the citizens »

RTD info http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/rtdinfo_en.html

