

Plenary session 5: PCST challenges and tools directed to young people

SCIENCE COMMUNICATION AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A RELATIONSHIP STUDY BETWEEN THE KEY ROLE PLAYERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Elsabé Conradie¹ Anske Grobler²

¹*Director Corporate Communication and Marketing. University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 0002. Tel: +12-420-2211, Fax: +12-420-2262, E-mail: elsabe.conradie@up.ac.za*

²*Head: Communication Management, Department of Marketing and Communication Management. University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 0002. Tel: +12-420-2306, Fax: +12-362-5085, E-mail: anske@postino.up.ac.za*

Abstract

The core of South African scientists is centred at Higher Education Institutions (HEI). HEI is a valuable source of scientific knowledge. A major function of Communication Specialists at HEI is communicating science to stakeholders, especially the youth.

South African born Mark Shuttleworth is a walking example of motivating young children to become aware of the importance of science. More examples like these are required to enhance science.

Although study results have not been finalised, it is clear that science messages do not reach the youth and other stakeholders in South Africa effectively. An improved focus on science journalism is required.

Key words: Role player relationships, trust, empowerment

Text

1. SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT OF SCIENCE COMMUNICATION

1.1 Challenges

South Africa, as a developing country is even more dependent on science and technology to support industries in order to reach informed decisions and to be competitive in the international marketplace. However, most people cannot distinguish between scientific, non-scientific or pseudo-scientific subjects. For these reasons, communicating science to various stakeholders – schools, government, decision-makers, general public and the media – is a necessity.

Although the covering of topics referring to science is increasing in the media, highly technical, sometimes biased articles often dominate the media (Joubert, 2001:324). The youth does not receive the correct information and therefore does not understand the importance of science. More role models like South African born Mark Shuttleworth – space shuttle guest to the moon in 2001 - should participate in endeavors to promote science amongst the youth.

Another challenge is to raise awareness and enthuse young people about the practical applications of science. By actively engaging learners in the scientific process of observation, interpretation and verification of information, a positive attitude towards science is instilled.

1.2 Tools

South Africa has initiated a number of science activities to communicate science to the public. Communication specialists at HEI are often tasked to participate in science activities, including National SET (science, engineering and technology) weeks, Sasol TechnoX and SciFest, Science Centres, Planetariums, Mobile science centres, such as the Tsebo Koloing (meaning “technology in motion”) truck of the University of Pretoria to promote science to the youth.

Experilab, a small chain of science shops, have a few outlets throughout South Africa. This concept holds untapped potential, providing business opportunities and can also be an enjoyable leisure activity.

The Internet also provides an important channel for direct communication between scientists and the public (Errington, 2002). South Africa should indulge in interactive web sites where scientists can respond to questions from the youth.

Many indigenous cultures in South Africa have oral traditions where storytelling is the preferred way of communication. Science Theatres and soap operas as tools could improve the message of science.

Some scientists have used even poetry in the past to promote their science and other enlightened scientists have added a melody to their verse and created a song. South African scientists should be encouraged to promote their research through popular tools of communication.

2. OBJECTIVES

2.1 Determining the importance of science communication in South Africa

The most important single information source for the public about science and technology is the mass media. Unfortunately, South Africa lacks skilled science journalists and above all, proper training of journalists. Currently, science journalism is almost non-existing in South Africa.

2.2 Determining the relationship between key role players

Communication specialists specifically tasked to promote science are not trusted well enough by their institutions and are not empowered to make decisions on their own when science communication is applicable (Steyn & Puth, 2000: 34). A relationship of trust between key role players in science communication (Executive Management, Scientists, Communication Specialists and Journalists) empowering communication specialists to promote science is a necessity to reach the youth effectively.

3. METHODS

A self-administered survey method was used in the study. Questionnaires were distributed to the abovementioned four populations (role players).

4. RESULTS

Results of the study have not been finalised. However, the overview of the results states that science messages do not reach the youth effectively. Too many institutions do not participate in science activities and do not regard science communication as a high priority in South Africa.

A lack of trust among key role players and a lack of empowering communication specialists cause distorted messages reaching the general public, especially the youth. There seems to be no working relationship amongst role players. A shortage of training in science writing is a major concern. Very few of the role players obtained proper science writing training.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

A recent study proved that although there is a positive attitude towards science, there is a lack of understanding amongst the public and the youth does not obtain enough information on science (Joubert, 2002:317). In South Africa the coverage of science in the media is generally very low.

Practitioners of science communication, particularly the younger generation, lack a network and work largely in isolation, with no capacity to act and lobby as an influential group. South Africa needs a more sustained and coordinated effort, backed by research, infrastructure and expertise.

Training is required for journalists, scientists and communication specialists to write about and broadcast science in various languages so that it can be comprehended by the youth. There is no graduate course in South Africa for science students wanting to specialise in science communication.

Communication specialists could be used more effectively to promote research findings, profile science achievers and build media relations with scientists and journalists to communicate science to the youth.

To enhance relationship with the young generation, communication specialists must take part in organising structured visits to science events and institutions and invite schools to interesting science experiments.

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