

Parallel Session 26: Interactions between science communication and science policies

FINDING COMMON LANGUAGE

Jill Nelson and Fiona Barbagallo

The BA (British Association for the Advancement of Science), Wellcome Wolfson Building, 165 Queen's Gate, London SW7 5HE, UK. Tel: +44-20-7017-4938, Email: fiona.barbagallo@the-ba.net and jill.nelson@the-ba.net

Key words: common language, dialogue

Introduction

Increasingly in the UK issues that involve science are high on the public agenda and there is a willingness to involve the public early in the debate. Early involvement of the public will help scientists and decision makers to understand and respond to public views, and by helping people more generally to appreciate that they can influence the progress of science and technology democratically.

But how early can members of the public become engaged in emerging science and technology? Can members of the public express 'informed' views and opinions before interacting (interfacing) with applications of science?

The Finding Common Language project aims to identify language, stories and frames of reference that will stimulate mature public discussions about scientific research, and issues arising from scientific research.

Background

The BA has a long track record in science communication and during the past three years has experimented with different formats for a range of target audiences. The purpose of the BA's science in society programme is to connect publics, policy makers and other decision makers, and the scientific and business communities by providing opportunities where issues involving contemporary science can be discussed. However, the BA and its target audiences increasingly recognise the need for public groups to be involved in discussions of science and technology in the early stages of funding and development.

The BA, in partnership with the UK's Office of Science and Technology (OST), is piloting a project—finding common language—to explore at what stages in the process of emerging scientific ideas to their application the public should be involved in discussing the possibilities offered from any particular area of research.

The OST, the government department that oversees much of the (public) science funding in the UK, facilitates a Foresight Programme which aims to provide challenging visions of the future for either a key issue where science holds the promise of solutions, or an area of cutting edge science where the potential applications and technologies have yet to be considered and articulated.

The area of cognitive systems is one of several emerging from the Foresight Programme which aims to crystal ball gaze new areas of science and technology and their implications for funding and for society.

The area of cognitive systems has been defined by the OST as artificial or natural systems that can sense, act, think, feel, communicate, learn and evolve.

The finding common language project is using cognitive systems as the area of science to:

- (a) learn how public engagement can be used in the very early development stages of science
- (b) explore and identify possible common language that could be used to stimulate mature public discussion
- (c) get a snapshot of opinions and thoughts of both the public members and scientists

If the pilot proves to be successful the process will be further developed to apply it to the other areas in the foresight programme.

Method

Three workshops were organised in early May 2004 involving 10 scientists, 4 professional science communicators and 10 members of the general public. The first workshop involved scientists from the life sciences and the physical and engineering sciences, and two science communicators. Two different science communicators were involved in the second workshop with members of the public that had been recruited by a market research company.ⁱⁱ

Initially, scientists and members of the public met separately to explore and become familiar with the content of the cognitive systems project. Each facilitated workshop lasted two and a half hours.

Scenarios were presented in the six areas of applications, identified by the scientists involved in the Foresight Programme, which are: business and commerce; health, well-being and performance; transport; arts, entertainment and companions; education; and military.

Participants were asked to consider the risks, uses and moral implications of each of the applications.ⁱⁱⁱ

The third workshop involved all the participants and is where the 'common language' was identified.

Observations

Independently, members of the public and scientists proposed similar discussion points and there were common themes running through the uses, risks and moral implications.

Both groups raised issues involving shifts in responsibility, quality of life, loss of social skills, and issues of control including where decisions are made about public funding policies both within science and across society as a whole.

This would indicate that if public engagement is handled appropriately, scientists and members of the public can have a mature conversation very early on in the development of science and technology.

The similarity of expression exhibited suggests that a degree of empathy was experienced by all parties. The scientists were talking about their area of research with non-experts on an equal footing. They were concentrating on areas of discussion (uses, risks and moral implications) where specific technical knowledge was not necessary. Some of the scientists commented that they had not previously thought about their work in this way and had found it enlightening. Something approaching a dialogue perhaps?

What this project has not explored at this stage is whether or not there will be a willingness to listen to public opinions when deciding on allocation of funding resources and policy making.

Notes

ⁱ For more details about the OST Foresight Programme visit www.foresight.gov.uk

ⁱⁱ Men and women, aged 20-60 years, who have an interest in science but rarely find the time to read/watch science stories.

ⁱⁱⁱ The decision to explore the risks, uses and moral implications was based on the research conducted by the Biotechnology and the European Public Concerted Action group in 1997. Nature 387 p845-847

PCST International Conference - www.pcst2004.org

