

Parallel Session 21: Science, Communication & Social Participation

THE BALEARIC ISLANDS SCIENCE FAIR: A NEW EXPERIENCE OF SCIENTIFIC POPULARISATION

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Abstract

The administration of the local government of the Balearic Islands took the initiative to organise a Science Fair for three consecutive years (2002, 2003 and 2004), featuring the participation of the region's many research centres (University, Institute of Oceanography, Meteorological Centre of the Balearic Islands, Astronomical Observatory, Museums, etc.), educational centres of all levels and various companies in the sector of technology.

Held for three days in a tented space in Palma, the Fair offered a wide range of scientific activities. Participants, students and scientists came together in their efforts to display their experiments in an educational and entertaining way, allowing visitors to actively learn and enjoy the different activities.

Prior to 2002, the mass media seldom covered matters relating to the sciences. Information of this sort was virtually always tied to the presence in the Balearic Islands of celebrities from the scientific world. The inauguration of the Fair in 2002, however, would have great impact on the media in this sense. While the event was being held, there was widespread coverage of it in the media. Today, the inclusion of scientific news pieces has become far more common in the Islands.

As a result, from the standpoint of communication, the Fair was a milestone in the Balearic Islands, thanks to which a significant step has been taken towards raising public awareness of science and increasing its presence in the mass media.

Key Words: Newspaper, Science, Fair, Young, People

Text

Background

Society has an ever-increasing need for a certain level of understanding of the new technologies and their effects on people's daily life and future. Initiatives such as *Setmanes de la Ciència* (Science Week events) and science fairs can serve as tools to spur the transmission and distribution of scientific knowledge. The Science Fair is an interactive space, a new medium for communication. Apart from being an educational mechanism, the media also play a fundamental role in the transmission of scientific knowledge, as well as establishing a scientific awareness in society.

The Science Fair is a costly initiative. Thus we are forced to weigh up its success. Is it effective to organise scientific events with the aim of increasing the curiosity, interest and scientific awareness of the society?

Method

On the initiative of the Ministry of Innovation and Energy of the local Government of the Balearic Islands, the 1st and 2nd Science Fairs (2002 and 2003) were organised and held by a commission made up of representatives from the aforementioned local Ministry, the local Ministry of Education and Culture, the University of the Balearic Islands and the Press Department.

The event featured the participation of educational centres, the University, other science and research centres in the Islands, centres from Spain's other autonomous regions that were invited to take part, as well as administrative and business centres. The educational centres prepared an interactive and didactic science project. The research groups brought to the streets a small sampling of the experiments conducted in their laboratories, and together everyone offered a group of experiments targeted at visitors of all ages, ranging from 4 years of age to 100.

The number of participants has gradually increased, with 35 the first year and 58 the second. The Fair lasted for three days, receiving 11,000 visitors the 1st day and 18,000 the second.

For nearly two years (May 2001 to April 2003), we analysed the daily news coverage relating to research, science, innovation and the information society in the press in Palma, Majorca, with a specific focus on four newspapers: *Diario de Mallorca*, *Ultima Hora*, *Diari de Balears* and *El Dia-El Mundo*. Two different time spans were compared: May 2001 to May 2002, and May 2002 to April 2003. Why such specific periods? Because the news pieces in the above-mentioned media the year before the first Science Fair were compared to those of the same papers during the year following the event's celebration.

Results

Before the first Science Fair was held, between the dates of May 2001 and May 2002, 208 news pieces specifically relating to the sciences were published. Following the first Science Fair, between May 2002 and April 2003, the number of news pieces covering these matters would ascend to 480. The second period analysed ended in April, rather than May, simply due to the fact that the second Science Fair was held a month earlier, in April 2003. Despite a one-month difference in this period, the Science, Technology and Innovation news pieces published during the second period in the *Diario de*

Mallorca, Ultima Hora, Diari de Balears and El Dia-El Mundo almost doubled in comparison with those published during the first period.

CONCLUSION

The celebration of the Science Fair has played a crucial role in increasing the Balearic Islands' mass media coverage of all matters pertaining to research, science, innovation and the information society. There are two reasons behind such increase in coverage. Firstly, the Science Fair itself has opened the doors to other science- and innovation-related events of all sorts in our Autonomous Region (with the consequential news coverage in the media). Secondly, and no less important, the celebration of an event as far-reaching as the Science Fair has awakened a growing interest in all journalists and of course in newspaper readers, as well as in radio programme listeners and television programme viewers.

