

DICYT: A PROPOSAL FOR REGIONAL SCIENCE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Based upon a theoretical framework of specialized and regional communication, we propose a regional oriented science communication model, in terms of purposes, media products and strategic actions, with the objective of reaching a more efficient representation of the local reality and a better public understanding of science. Applied to practice, we present DICYT (Regional Agency of Scientific and Technological Communication), whose main challenge is to promote scientific and technological culture in Castile and Leon, Spain, through the diffusion to local mass media of results of the scientific research and technological projects, both public and private, generated in the region.

Key words: communication, theoretical framework, cultural diversity

Text

1. Regional communication: theoretical framework

What is the place for regional science and technology in the present globalized and impact and sensationalism driven mass media scene? In a study of the regional press in Castile and Leon, Sabbatini et al. (2004) found that there is an imbalance between major questions in science and technology, present in newspapers through editorial genres and through social problem and policy framings, and the information found in news, which theoretically should support such a public debate in an informed way. Scientific and technological news were found to be communicated mainly through short pieces of information, provided by international news agencies and resulting in an

absence of contextualization, even opposing views of the same subject. So, what strategies could be used to harness a true regional science communication, one that could serve as a bridge between society and the science and technology system, in order to place the scientific knowledge at the heart of a region's development?

2. The DICYT proposal

In this context, we propose DICYT, Science and Technology Communication Agency, a part of Novatores Project, developed by Junta of Castile and Leon and Salamanca University (Quintanilla et al., 2004) and whose objective is to create a Regional System for Science and Technology Communication, bringing science and technology activities closer to society and harnessing its social valuation.

As a communication agency, DICYT has as final users the mass communication media (radio, press, television), with special interest in those that carry out their activities in the region. To these clients, DICYT offers exclusive and ready to use information about science and technology related subjects in different genres (news, articles, interviews), completed with additional elements like infographics, video and audio clips.

Its main contribution to the region's public institutions and companies is to establish a reliable communication channel, with information being prepared by specialized science communicators, and being an agile method for communicating advances in the science and technology that the rest of the society should know.

3. Technical infrastructure and operation

The DICYT agency offers its services through a Web page (<http://www.dicyt.com>), with access granted only to users with a personal registration password: journalists in communication media and also to its many collaborators. The Internet platform has a double objective: by one side, to allow the agency's journalists and editors to have a content management tool, common to their labour. On the other hand, to allow clients quick and time-space independent access to news. In the future, information will reach each user through electronic mail, according to a profile with declared interests on subjects or spatial coverage. The platform has been developed as independent and own software, using free software technologies. For new production, the Agency counts on a network of correspondents, spread across 7 of the 9 region's provinces, besides Madrid.

As a previous step in its establishment, a production manual was elaborated, covering style rules and the journalistic methodology and routines used. Dealing with specialized communication, it was also intended to have recommendations upon how effectively work with sources and process information, both necessary to explain, translate and rebuild scientific knowledge to a general audience. In the future, it is expected to have a set of recommendations and case studies related to the ethics of science and technology communication incorporated (Sabbatini, 2004).

3. First findings

Since the beginning of its operation in 18th December 2003, news agency DICYT has signed agreements with more than 20 regional communication media and has prepared more than 700 pieces of information, according to the following tables:

Type	Short News	News	Articles	Other	Total
Proportion	35%	50%	10%	5%	100%

Table 1 – Information pieces by genre

	Total
Ávila	40
Burgos	70
León	50
Palencia	35
Salamanca	150
Segovia	35
Soria	85
Valladolid	180
Zamora	50
Region Total	695
National and International	40
Total	735

Table 2 – Pieces of information by geographical location

Regarding the use of information supplied on behalf of its clients, DICYT is performing a follow up, with identification of news published in main newspapers. Although up to this moment there is no formal study, two main modes of news utilization have been detected. The first, concerning

breakthrough and topical subjects are used the following day after publication in the agency's Web page; in second place, permanent interest subjects, like fight against cancer, astronomical and space exploration discoveries, are retrieved from the archive several weeks after release and are used as aid in the elaboration of special articles. Regarding geographical coverage, news related with the immediate surroundings, e.g. in the local and province scopes, have a greater chance of being reused, while national and international news are less frequent to be published.

4. Conclusions

In its future development, DICYT considers the possibility of expanding its services, for example, promoting Castile and Leon's science and technology institutions, as well as companies, in Spanish and international scopes. Another line of action, already tried out, is to prepare information under requests, in an exclusive way for a specific medium, trying to convey an original and rigorous approach to a subject. This later would have a financial cost, while the daily information service is free.

In conclusion, DICYT is taking the first steps in bringing science and technology closer to the regional media in Castile and Leon. Although there are still many barriers to surpass, mainly related with a lack of value's perception of this kind information, it is the cornerstone for developing innovative strategies, in order to create favourable conditions for a scientific and technological culture across society in its whole.

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