Science communication, access and the quality of science news disseminated to the public are still at inadequate levels in many of the South East European (SEE) countries. This was noted during a UNESCO Venice Office round table on “Assessing and Disseminating Scientific Information in South East Europe” held in Maribor, Slovenia in November 2005. Prior to this round table, fact-finding missions were undertaken in many of the SEE countries. The mission results all recognised the importance of increasing political commitment and reinforcing regional cooperation so as to improve public understanding and interest in science.

The PCST2012 parallel sessions organized by the UNESCO Venice Office provided an opportunity for science journalists from Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey to share their best practices in communicating science. It was also an occasion to meet peers and update regional contacts with specialised science media. With the financial support of the UNESCO Venice Office and the Italian Government, the Venice Office provided eight travel grants for selected SEE science journalists to participate in PCST 2012. The sessions, were chaired by Mario Scalet and Rosanna Santesso from the UNESCO Venice Office.

Isabella Susa (Agora Scienza) briefly provided details about training/summer schools on science communication for PhD science students at the University of Turin in Italy. The objective of the training/summer school is to establish a better dialogue between science and society as well as providing a form of tutoring of science communication for researchers and scientists. More details are available at: http://www.agorascienza.it/en/training/scs

Susan Schneegans, Editor, A World of Science UNESCO, spoke about “Reflections on quality and accountability in communicating science internationally”, followed by the presentations of the eight SEE science journalists. All slide presentations can be downloaded from http://www.slideshare.net

The participants noted that many newspaper editors tended to be sceptical about the level of public interest in science and thus reluctant to publish stories on science. On numerous occasions, science news often appears in an incongruous section, such as that on life and entertainment. Frequently science articles are associated with pseudoscience like astrology. E. Baris Altintas from Turkey and Mico Tatalovic from Croatia highlighted the need for more honesty in the mass media. Some ‘science stories’ are utilised as advertising for alternative health remedies whose effects had been poorly researched.

Tatjana Stojceska from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia recalled the continual challenge faced by the media in making science more attractive for the public, particularly youth. She suggested that governments finance the purchase of science documentaries produced by renowned broadcasting companies so to air them on national television. Milena Milunovic from Montenegro informed the participants that this type of television investment is successfully being carried out in her country.

It was noted that the media tended to prefer to publish information on national/domestic
research rather than international science, even though news of domestic breakthroughs was rare. Moreover, Julianna Photopoulos from Greece observed that, even though initiatives to promote science in her country were becoming popular, such as science days and festivals or science cafés, these events were not necessarily being reported by newspapers.

It was also remarked that journalists too need training in how to present science stories. Serbian television presenter Ljubica Urosevic mentioned that the Science Promotion Centre established in Belgrade in 2010 offered regular training workshops for media professionals. (Her presentation is published at greater length in the following paper.) Ayelet Baram-Tsabari (Israel) agreed that regional and/or national training for science communicators is an asset.

Maria Grigorova Tcherneva from Bulgaria pointed out that direct contacts and meetings between journalists and scientists are lacking. This mutual mistrust compromises good science journalism and does not generate a democratic debate on the impact of science in society. A proposal to elaborate the preparation of a reference guide for scientists on good practices was mentioned. This could be a useful tool in attempting to bridge the communication gap.

Science journalists also encounter difficulties in obtaining information rapidly about new developments in scientific research. Mico Tatalovic suggested the need for a regional science news agency to dispatch and disseminate press releases. He also recommended inviting ministries to produce press releases on developments related to the research they supported through the research budgets and grants they allocated to research institutes and universities under their supervision.

The informal brainstorming session led to the exchange and sharing of comments and ideas on how UNESCO could further support science journalism in Southeast Europe. The participants unanimously agreed to draft some recommendations to prepare as an annex of science communication needs and priorities to be presented during the next SEE Round Table of Ministers of Science in late 2012. The sessions concluded with the participants responding enthusiastically to the UNESCO Venice Office proposal to create a regional network or national association of science journalists.

Conclusions

Generally speaking, the journalists were critical of the quality of science journalism. They suggested that:

- journalists need training in how to present science stories. Mario Scalet proposed the idea of a summer school for PhD students in communicating science to the public, possibly organised by UNESCO’s Venice Office if funding could be identified.
- the need for a SEE science news agency to dispatch regularly press releases/news information on new research.
- the need for governmental support for science television programmes.
- several speakers suggested creating a regional association of science journalists. The UNESCO Venice Office could possibly host this body, at least temporarily. The journalists
would be able to communicate via postings on the site.

- the lack of contact/communication between journalists and scientists can compromise good science journalism.

- The UNESCO Venice Office plans to liaise with the science journalists present at the session to elaborate a series of recommendations for submission to ministers of science and higher education from Southeast Europe at a meeting planned for later in the year.

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