2009-06-27

Roadmapping Science in Society

Answers and Presentation by Hanns-J. Neubert for ESF-workshop Paris 2009-06-30

Length: 2201 words

Content

ANSWERS

Does the term "Dialogue" properly characterise a new position of science in society?

Actually, "dialogue" is not a new term used in the relationship between science and the public. It has been proposed since long, but hardly filled with meaning, if at all. If the EFS succeeds to fill the term with meaning it would be a real new start.

In the past, the word "dialogue" has mostly been proposed by the mighty to get a feedback from the "customers" in order to adapt the services to the needs. Thus "dialogue" in my ears is more or less an instrument of PR/communication/dissemination with a back-channel. The public may be involved in a decision, but it cannot participate, and thus not really influence the methods and the goals.

For a participatory attempt, as it should be more appropriate for a democratic society, I propose the term "debate".

What are the potential benefits and weaknesses of a Dialogue approach compared with other approaches such as communication, dissemination, diffusion or expertise?

It has a back-channel, which most other means of communication do not have. Communication, dissemination and diffusion are more or less PR tools in order to convince the target group of goals which are not necessarily their own, or

to propose benefits which are often only promises.

How is Science-Society Dialogue practised today?

It is not really practised in the meaning of the word.

Impact: What is the public?

Simply all those brave people working hard to pay their taxes, from which a share is allocated to put a certain class of people into the position to do scientific research.

Please, no more definitions of a “public”. There should be a number of definitions around developed already by social scientists. Choose from those. Do not invent the wheel anew.

Evaluation: What criteria should be used in the evaluation of research in its many facets?

I understand that scientists always need evaluation criteria to the “scientificness” of everything what they do. But imposing criteria for human and democratic communication processes is not always adequate. These are processes very similar to chaotic processes, following habits, fashions, and even differing experiences of generations or age groups. They all change with time making it difficult to develop sustainable criteria.

A widely used criterion is the usefulness of science for the society. But that is too narrow, even for the public interested in science. Other criteria could be the benefits for the cultural development of a society or simply the wish

to understand the world. But I doubt that this is measurable.

Evaluation: How to make them pertinent, also in the long term?

I fear there is no enduring receipt, as habits, fashion and the way people communicate can change very rapidly and unforeseeable with time. To find receipts to make a dialogue pertinent, you need forecasts. And forecasts are not possible, not even in scientific research or computer models.

Accountability: What information does research need, and what do the co-actors of research in society need for a better understanding?

They need to know the demands of society. Which also means that the public is in the position to formulate its needs, which is basically an educational question. Unfortunately Europe is currently, through the Bologna process, on the way to produce at least one whole generation of illiterate students, leading to a society which might be ignorant of science, like in the USA where science in the society has been totally absent until the Obama administration.

PRESENTATION

Intro

The European Union of Science Journalists (EUSJA) and I myself welcome the achievements of ESF to improve the relationship between science and society. I myself have been involved as expert evaluator since the 5th research framework programme of the European Commission in science and society issues, or as it is called nowadays: science **in** society issues.

As evaluators, we started to ask for communication and dissemination plans and outcomes very early, however this was for several years seen by scientists as an added bureaucratic demand. Only in recent years the input became more substantial, though I sometimes still feel that a number of scientists think that relations with the public are under their level, thought it seems now to be routine in science proposals.

Besides: From my experiences as science journalist I recognised, that top-scientists usually also are great communicators. Thus supporting excellent science means also to support dialogue.

Comment on ESF background papers and topic

When I read the background papers to this workshop, I saw a lot of science, a lot of theoretical models from communication science, but only little about the real

communication between people, science and audiences, a métier in which science journalists act every day at least 8, 10, 12 or more hours. In the presentation of Jean-Pierre Alix, session 2, I heard mainly references to theories of non-communicators like Kant or Descartes, but no reference to science communicators like Humboldt or Einstein.

Another point, where I have to correct Jean-Pierre Alix: Scientists are the **sources** of information, whereas the media are only the **channels** to transport the information, not sources themselves! He is right in quoting, that the public trusts more the scientists than the media, but it's the media which tell the public that it can trust scientists.

However, I am utmost happy to read that you are seeing the problems in the relation between science and society. And I was aware that this event today and tomorrow is in my eyes the first one which really can change this relations – after so many smaller and often unsuccessful trials everywhere in Europe.

So: Congratulations, that you brought this up.

EUSJA and the research organisations

ESF is a bit younger than EUSJA, which was founded in 1971, but from the very beginning of ESF, we both ESF and EUSJA had been good partners.

Since a couple of years while competing for research funds, PR became more important for the science institutions and

organisations, but real relations with the public were left behind. And in many organisations the accountants became more important than the visionaries.

I do not know how this was in ESF, but e.g. EUSJA was confronted by the fact that after many years of good relations, journalists, their democratic functions, and their input and ideas regarding science and the public were no longer of use, and ESF quit our relationship. However, being a grass-root organisation ourselves, we found in EuroScience a more visionary partner and with EuroScience EUSJA feels quite close to the real scientists, especially as the ESOF conferences turned out to be a quite successful debate tool for Europe.

So I was surprised and also very, very happy to hear that ESF saw that there is still a problem, and is obviously very engaged in tackling the problem.

Missing real communication

What has been done by science in the past years has been mainly a one-way communication, which has of course its place in the public relation mix: Sending out information.

Attempts for dialogues have been mainly a one-way communication with a back-channel for comments, not really creating a relationship on eye level of citizens as clients and the science as deliverers.

Do not misunderstand me, science is a top down cultural

activity in its own right, and with own decision processes which should be independent from day-to-day politics. Science is a cultural activity for which the society pays for in order to become more knowledgeable, more in the known. Technology on the other hand is a bottom-up activity connected to arts and handicraft, which may use results from science in order to improve its skills and tools.

Other attempts like science museums are more or less amusements fairs. People go there, have fun and leave. I doubt that they can deliver a sustainable knowledge basis.

Science Debate Germany 2009
http://www.wissenschaftsdebatte2009.de

In Germany one of the national members of EUSJA, the German Science Writers TELI, started a science debate in the current pre-election phase of the German parliamentary elections coming September. Besides being translators of scientific results, describers of the world, or story tellers, in a democratic society they have also a function as mediators between science, politics and the public. The German journalists took up just this aspect of their function and started the debate without any funding, with very limited time for unpaid work, just driven by the idea that something has to be done in the science-society-relationship – the same idea which bring you all here together today in Paris.

The rules of the science debate are very simple: Collecting ideas, visions and demands from science, concentrate them into 10 to 20 questions put to prime political candidates,

and publishing their answers on the internet. In a third step citizens are invited to give their comments, ideas and vision by filling out a questionnaire, commenting to blog contributions, in web-2.0-communities or on Twitter. Every couple of days the state of the debate is published.

As journalists we are of course seen by our colleague journalists. Through this awareness-rising we hope to bring science questions more into the centre of the elections and thus out to the public.

Our role model was a similar action by US-American colleagues who helped us a lot in bringing the German debate on the road.

If successful, EUSJA will take over from the testbed and rise it to the European level, which we can do using our 27 member organisations in the European countries, whereas EUSJA itself will tackle the European aspect.

All main science and technology organisations welcomed the German science debate, like the German Acatech, Fraunhofer, Helmholtz Society, Max-Planck-Society and others.

Headwind from Science

But we found also headwind. The German Research Foundation DFG, which is also member of ESF, refused to support the science debate with two arguments:

1. DFG wants to stay unpolitical. This is a position which is outdated since 30 or 40 years and it was interesting for us

journalists to hear such a argument even today. Besides, threatened by budget cuts from the German government recently, the President of DFG interfered with a utmost political speech with the parliamentary discussion.

2. DFG is not interested in a science debate because it sees that science gets enough support from the government, because DFG recently received a substantial add-on for its funding — after the political interference of the President of DFG. Let me describe the situation in Germany a bit overstated: Science has been bought by the politics in order to keep its mouth shut.

However, the debate is running, the German DFG is out and others may shape German science politics in the future. I really wish and hope that you as ESF can convince your members to become more open, even open for proposals from the citizens, as you stated in your workshop programme.

Offer

You have of course the full support of the European science journalists. And if we can help you to reach your targets, we will help and give support. We as journalists think that dialogues and debates about science are utmost important in Europe. In that respect Europe clearly outclasses the US.

However, we are journalists and want to be neutral as far as possible, we want to continue to function as advocates of our audiences, and thus we also want to allow us to be critical. But we are common in the goal that science and society

dialogues and debates are very necessary.

A last advice: Just start something. If you meet somebody on the train and you want to talk to this person, you do not make a big plan before you open your mouth. If you said something wrong, you always have the chance to do it better next time. The communication process is an interaction which changes constantly over time, sometimes very rapidly. If you make plans, make them particular flexible and listen always to your audience.

Hanns-J. Neubert

E-Mail: hajo@eusja.org, Tel: +49-40-41 80 43

Hanns-J. Neubert is freelance science journalist, President of EUSJA and Chairman of the Board of the German Science Writers TELI.

More about Neubert: http://www.sciencecom.eu, http://www.eusja.org, http://www.teli.de