

Bridging the Gap: Conference Explores Public Communication of Science and Technology

Fiona Barbagallo

The sixth international conference on Public Communication of Science and Technology (PCST) was held 1-3 February in Geneva, Switzerland. Its theme was “Trends in Science Communication Today: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice”. The expression “bridging the gap” has often been used to legitimize science-communication activities to bridge the gap between science and the public. At the previous PCST conference, in Berlin 2 years ago, there was an underlying tension between two camps: the theorists and the practitioners of science communication. The ambitious title of the sixth conference aimed to bring together the many approaches in science communication and their impact on one another.

The PCST network consists of a wide and varied community that includes journalists, science-museum staff, officials of governmental science-awareness programs, sociologists, historians, public-relations consultants, and scientists. The overall agenda of the different participants may be the same—communicating science to the public—but the reasons behind the communication and the types of communication are varied. That was immediately obvious in the large number of parallel workshops addressing a wide range of issues, such as media coverage of science, institutional science communication, and science-museum practices.

This year’s conference was hosted by CERN, the European Organisation for Nuclear Research, home of the world’s largest particle-physics center and the birthplace of the World Wide Web. One of the themes of the conference, appropriately, was examining novel ways of communicating science, such as the Web. The day before the official start of the conference, participants were invited to a WWW workshop to explore effective and innovative approaches

to the delivery of scientific information and learning over the Web. The workshop was organized by the International World Wide Web Institute (IWWWI).

The theme of novel communication was readdressed during one of the plenary sessions. Sian Ede, of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation UK Branch, spoke of a creative collaboration between scientists and artists. Ede provided visual images of artists’ work that explored the relationship of art and science.

Locating the sixth PCST conference on the very site of the largest scientific laboratory in the world reflected the need for integrating scientists into the communication process. The increasing involvement of scientific institutions in the communication of science and the role of scientific expertise in policy-making were themes of a number of workshops. Hans-Peter Peters, of the German Program Group of Humans, Environment and Technology, queried the difference between a scientist and an expert and argued that the public is critical of expert knowledge and independence. He suggested that scientists need to be aware of the role they are taking on when providing expert knowledge.

On the site of CERN a permanent exhibition communicates CERN’s research to the general public. The exhibition attracts over 20 000 visitors each year. Interactive exhibitions and programs are examples of a practical dimension of PCST. Not only were such programs and exhibitions described at the conference, but also the research and learning occurring at science museums and centers and their accompanying programs—once again “bridging the gap” by drawing on different approaches such as anthropology, sociology, and education.

Science journalists are major contributors to science communication. David Dickson, of *Nature* UK, introduced the impact of science press coverage on public opinion. Dickson argued that science journalism should empower people to challenge scientific knowledge and regulation. To address

that issue, a free-access Internet-based information network is being developed under the sponsorship of *Nature* to explore the linkages between science, technology, innovation, and development. This theme was further discussed in two workshops, “Research and Practice in Science Journalism” and “Media Coverage of Science, Health, and Environmental Issues”.

In the session “Scientists as Communicators within Society”, Kirk Junker and Brian Trench, of Dublin City University, Ireland, focused on scientists’ communication with one another about their engagement with the public. They sampled a small number of leading science journals exploring discussions of scientists and found that there is a substantial amount of discussion in most scientific communities on the subject of communication with the public; the strongest communication is in the physical sciences.

The conference included a session about the European Network of Science Communication Teachers (ENSCOT), another example of a partnership bridging the gap between academic and practical sides of science communication. ENSCOT is developing two resources: a European science-communication module that will enable a European perspective on public understanding of science to be taught to science-communication students, and a prototype science-communication workshop to train scientists working on European Union projects in discussing their work with lay audiences.

Conference participants were invited to experience first-hand two practical examples of science communication: “Science in the Pub” from Australia and “Cabaret Pasteur” from France. Both performances were examples of educational and entertaining science programs that science communicators are presenting around the globe.

For more detailed information about the PCST conference, refer to visitservice.web.cern.ch/VisitsService/pcst2001.



FIONA BARBAGALLO is a doctoral student in the School of Communications at Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland.