

# UK scientists reflect on an engagement world

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# UK policy background

- Ongoing official concern about the public
  - Mid 1980s onwards: science communication for public support
  - Late 1990s onwards: public engagement and dialogue for public trust
  - Early 2000s: public dialogue for policy input (Sciencewise)
- Ongoing debate about meanings and intents

# Public engagement incentives for scientists

- Availability of funding
- Requirement in scientific research proposals
- Range of prizes and awards
- The new Research Assessment Exercise?  
(John Denham 2008)

# SCOPE

- Scientists on public engagement: from communication to deliberation?
- Funded by **welcome**trust
- Sarah Franklin (PI) and Kerry Holden (RA)

# The study

- Objective: to better understand scientists' perceptions of a range of issues around public engagement
- 30 semi-structured interviews, May 2007 to June 2008
- Life scientists with experience of public engagement, including deliberative forms

# Three issues

1. Relationships between science and society
2. The purposes of public engagement
3. Public engagement and the professional scientist

# Relationships between science and society

“By and large the public is extremely interested in science, particularly in medical science areas. And the notion that there’s a disaffection with science...is largely wrong.... ...Well, it’s hard to know [why things sometimes go wrong] ... Nuclear energy...I think there’s a gap in [public] understanding ... Why there’s concern about GM is hard to know...it’s sort of a feeling that there’s something unnatural about it...there was an early event with Monsanto, which shows what you shouldn’t do ... I think there’s various, it’s not clear ... Animal experimentation...there’s just a group of people who...distort the science ... why there’s all this fuss about nanotechnology just defeats me.” (Walter Bodmer)

# Relationships between science and society

- Complex and nuanced conceptions
- Ideal relationship
  - A general observation and an aspiration
  - Public support and confidence
  - A direct or unmediated relationship: *just the two of us*
- Troubled relationship
  - Occasional (and always a potential) problem
  - Lack of public support and confidence
  - Difficult to explain
  - Caused by one or more 'others': *three's a crowd*

# The purposes of public engagement

**Jolanta Opaka-Juffry:** Misconceptions about what science does, what is the value of science to society and to individual people, how scientists operate, are they useful at all, and then the more general level, how the programmes and ideas and trends in research are decided about. ...

**J-OJ:** I have a start point which is quite simple. A lot of research in the UK is supported by public funds, unlike in the States, where charity money is forming the bulk. In other words, it's taxpayers' money.

**Julia Polak:** You educate in school because you encourage the youngster how exciting it is to do science.

**Chris Frith:** Because if I don't tell them what I'm doing, somebody else will...and may not get it quite right.

**Stephen Gentleman:** So, I think public engagement is important ... for making decisions on how to take the science forward in a societal sort of perspective.

# The purposes of public engagement

- Public education/communication
- Identifying education needs
- Correcting misinformation
- To inspire (especially young people)
- To fulfil a duty
- To ensure a socially-contextualised science
- To achieve the ideal relationship: public support and confidence

# Public engagement and the professional scientist 1

**Austin Smith:** So, this is the problem, it's very easy for people to come up with suggestions [for public engagement], ... but they do take time and you only have a limited amount of time. ...It takes time, it takes enthusiasm, it takes somebody saying ..., we could do a really good exhibition for these school kids, or you could write this article ...

**KB:** ... Austin, would you say that public engagement is part of your profession, in the same way as being in the lab, writing a proposal?

**AS:** Yeah, it is, ... next Tuesday, I'm going to Norwich, so that'll take most of the day, to give a 45 minute lecture to school teachers, and I was sitting and looking at my schedule yesterday thinking, oh God, I could do with this like a hole in the head, but then I thought, well, I chose to do this because that's actually quite a useful thing to do, because I'm talking to a lot of teachers. ...

**KB:** Because what strikes me is that the amount of time and the importance of this has perhaps increased in recent years, yet the ways in which public engagement is rewarded in academic science career structures hasn't.....

# Public engagement and the professional scientist 2

**AS:** Yes, well, I was actually going to make that point ... and what you'll find is the funding bodies and the universities will say, oh, that's great, and then when it comes to your next grant application or particularly your promotion application with the university, it's, it's just completely discounted .... But again, part of the problem there, I think, is that public communication, public engagement is kind of soft. There's no hard measures. ... whereas you can see what, how somebody's doing in terms of the peer reviewed publications ...

**KB:** But John Denham made a speech at the Royal Society of Arts early this year, in which he hinted at the desire to include public engagement in whatever it is that ends up replacing the RAE. ... But I just wonder, how would you react to, to that, setting aside the issue of how to measure it, in principle, is that something that would meet with your agreement?

**AS:** Yeah, I think so, you know, I think and I think it probably would generally with the universities, because I think the universities are also realising this is something they have to do to keep the public on side.

# Public engagement and the professional scientist

- Public engagement is considered part of the scientific profession
- Public engagement presents challenges
  - Time and energy
  - Perceptions of peers
  - Lack of, and problems of, integration into formal science career/reward structures

# Concluding thoughts

- Public engagement appears to be at a stage of early maturity for scientists
- Scientists are thinking in increasingly sophisticated ways about society and about public engagement
- Public engagement is part of being a scientist
- The emphasis remains on changing the public; science remains largely outside of the frame
- The objective is always a supportive public

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