Communicating science to society: A challenge to be met

EurekAlert!

According to the thesis by PhD holder Claudia Loaiza-Escutia, written up in the UVP/EHU's Department of Logic and Philosophy of Science, European scientists have difficulty connecting with the general public and journalists. The causes of these difficulties are, above all, the lack of institutional support, pressures of work, and not having any training in communication.

The study by Claudia Loaiza stands out because not only does it include quantitative information on scientists' preferences, commitments, limitations and incentives to interact with members of the public, it also gathers together an abundant, rich selection of unprocessed individual comments expressed by the scientists in face to face interviews."Other similar studies are based on surveys over the phone or the Internet," explains Loaiza."Yet I've had the chance to hold personal interviews with all my interviewees, and that has enabled me to gather qualitative information which would otherwise be lost."

Loaiza has in fact personally interviewed 112 European scientists who belong to five European research centres devoted to developing the area of nanotechnology and materials sciences.The centres selected were: the Donostia International Physics Center (DIPC), in Donostia-San Sebastian, Basque Country; the Fritz Haber Institute (FHI), in Berlin; the Centre d' Elaboration de Materiaux et d'EtudesStructurales (CEMES), in Toulouse, France; the Instituto per lo Studio deiMaterialiNanostrutturati (ISMN), in Bologna, Italy; and the Centre for Materials Science and Engineering (CSME), in Edinburgh, United Kingdom.She also interviewed 9 press and public

communications officers from different research centres, local as well as national ones, in order to find out about the difficulties and progress made in these offices in the matter of the public communication of science over the last five years.

Loaiza points out that only half of the scientists interviewed participate in activities to communicate science to the general public, "or they do not do so on a regular basis," she specifies.However, there are exceptions:"In some countries, like Germany and the United Kingdom, there is a great tradition of open days.So at the Fritz Haber Institute and the Centre for Materials Science and Engineering, over90% of the researchers participate in these activities every year".But the participation is much more limited in other types of interaction with the public, like talks, interviews with journalists, publications of popular science articles, etc."For example, at the above-mentioned German institute, between only 43% and 24% of the researchers participate in initiatives of this kind, depending on the type of activity."

The experts in communication, a key component

It is clear that the centres that have press rooms and communications experts have greater resources for effectively communicating to the general public the scientific work the researchers carry out at these centres.However, Loaiza's study has revealed that the situation of communications experts is very limited:"Of the five centres studied, three had a communications officer working part time and with very little funding."

On the other hand, Loiza has confirmed that many of the scientists were reticent towards the communications departments because they thought that resources were being diverted, "and even that their activity could harm or modify their lines of research."Even so, Loaiza believes that these attitudes are changing, thanks to external social demand and the need felt by scientiststo make themselves public and be taken into consideration in the distribution of public funding.

In Loaiza's view, the study is important "so that those responsible for designing policies have actual data on which to base themselves when it comes to deciding which strategies should be encouraged," with the aim of bringing science and scientific and technological production closer to the general public.

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