

Public communication and engagement in science: lessons learned from COVID-19

Workshop agenda

Workshop to be held on 22 April, 2022, via Zoom, 12:00-16:15 (Paris time)

This OECD GSF workshop is part of a broader project on *Mobilising science in response to COVID-19: lessons learned from COVID-19*.

Background

The COVID-19 crisis has dominated the public sphere for many months. The desire for rapid news on COVID-19-related developments, and the general interest of pretty much everyone in the world regarding COVID-19, means that science has been in greater demand than ever before. In this regard, the crisis has underlined the challenges of science communication and engagement with society.

Traditional media information has frequently been challenged by postings on social networks. The role and impact of official communications, mainstream and social media in the public exchange of information between scientists (experts), government (policy-makers), intermediaries (journalists and social media platforms), and citizens evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic and played out very differently in different contexts.

At the same time, managing scientific uncertainties, that are inevitable during crises, has proven to be a formidable challenge for the scientific community, as the traditional debates that usually takes place within the academic system have spilled over into the public domain and sometimes led to confusion and distrust.

A potential solution for increasing trust is more effective public engagement and mobilisation, but the participatory frameworks for achieving this have had to be adapted. The pandemic limited in-person contacts and innovative mechanisms had to be developed, making the maximum use digital tools.

This workshop will explore the challenges and interesting practices that emerged for communicating scientific information by various stakeholders and engaging the public during the COVID-19 pandemic. It will explore how to build public trust, which is necessary for the successful implementation of policies to address crises.

12:00-12:15

Introduction

Presentation of the activity and workshop goals by the Secretariat and co-chairs (Tereza Stockelova, Czech Academy of Sciences; Julian Thomas, RMIT University)

12:15-13:15 Session 1: Scientific information, disinformation, and misinformation: perspectives from communication professionals

There are a diversity of information channels that play a role in the uptake, understanding and reaction of policy makers and the general public to scientific information during crises. Over the course of the pandemic, uncertainties and assumptions inherent to science have been subject to intense public scrutiny. This has happened against the background of an evolving crisis that has generated huge amounts of scientific data and information, much of which lends itself to different interpretations. Whilst some societal groups deliberately promote misinformation to push their own agendas, there is also considerable uncertainty associated with legitimate scientific information, which allows for different conclusions to be drawn by experts and non-experts alike. The information/misinformation binary is too simplistic to explain how scientific information is being used and misused during the pandemic, in a context of visible distrust of governments and scientists by major sections of society and the democratisation of knowledge dissemination through social media platforms (to be covered in session 4).

Whilst the pandemic has seen many scientists take the initiative to engage and communicate with the public, most public information on science has, in one way or another, been conveyed via an intermediary. Indeed, almost all public scientific communication involves intermediaries. These intermediaries, whether traditional publishers, media organisations or digital media platforms, play a large role in framing scientific communication and how it is interpreted. This session will explore the role and impact of official communications and mainstream and social media in the public exchange of information between scientists (experts), government (policy-makers), intermediaries (journalists and social media platforms), and citizens (non-experts and influencers) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overarching Questions:

- How can communication professionals work with other actors to ensure that scientific rigour, transparency and accountability are embedded in public communications that are disseminated via mainstream media and social media platforms?
- What different strategies and tools may be required to address or mitigate public confusion in crises, where uncertainty and quickly evolving information pose significant risk to public health and/or civil stability?
- What are the key lessons learned from COVID-19 that need to be acted on in order to improve public communication of science in future crises?
- Case studies
 - Lu'chen Foster (Head of health partnerships, Facebook): Managing conflicting information in social media
 - Takahiro Kinoshita (Deputy-Chair, Covid-19 Navigator Cov-Navi): Collaboration between scientists and journalists to flatten the curve of infodemic
- Panel discussion
 - Gabriela Capurro (University of Manitoba and School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University)

13:15-13:30 Break

13:30-14:30 Session 2: Managing diverse scientific opinions and uncertainties

Scientists and scientific institutions express a diversity of views on issues of critical importance for understanding and managing the pandemic. These in turn are often based on incomplete and uncertain data and information which may or may not have been published or subject to review by peers. This can create difficulties for decision-making, lead to confusion in the public and undermine adherence to policy measures to mitigate the pandemic. Strong public disagreement amongst scientists can provide a breeding ground for the production of misinformation.

This session will explore how the scientific community, including scientific institutions and individual scientists, can help organise internal and external debate and communicate uncertainties with decision-makers and the general public. It will explore approaches for managing a plurality of scientific views, whilst ensuring transparency and avoiding public confusion and distrust. An important aspect of this is understanding the capacity and willingness of different scientific disciplines, to reflexively interrogate their own underlying assumptions, values and perspectives, including through transdisciplinary and cross-sectoral engagement.

Overarching questions:

- What approaches can be taken to manage, maintain and communicate diversity and uncertainty in scientific perspectives while maintaining public trust and avoiding conflicting messages?
- How and to what extent should contextual factors, including those arising during crises, be considered in choosing the science communication approach and level of transparency to be adopted?
- How might traditional scientific quality control, validation and communication processes be adapted to respond to the rapidly evolving demand from policy-makers and civil society during crises?
- Case studies
 - Anat Gesser-Edelsburg (University of Haifa) : Parallel evolution of the internal discourse on Covid in health institutions with the communication to the public: an Israeli case study
 - Jean-Gabriel Ganascia (CNRS ethics committee, France): Scientific communication from researchers during a health crisis
- Discussion
 - Tracy Vaillancourt (Chair of the Royal Society Canada taskforce on COVID-19)

14:30-15:30 Session 3: Public engagement and mobilisation in science and science advice during crises

There is general agreement on the importance of public engagement in science, but limited consensus on the underlying rationales and best practices for effective implementation and evaluation. In practice, the engagement of the public in research and science advisory processes is constrained in “peacetime” by theoretical, practical and political challenges. In this regard the pandemic has provided an interesting setting for innovation. A number of grassroots initiatives¹ and experiments in participatory governance or the democratization of science and scientific advice have emerged in different contexts. It is interesting to explore what can be learned from these case studies in terms of how bottom-

¹ like the [Body Politic Covid-19 Support Group](#)

up mobilization and top-down engagement can be better facilitated in the future and the potential impacts of this on the effectiveness of the evidence-based response to crises.

Overarching questions:

- What are the major challenges or opportunities that have emerged in relation to public engagement and/or mobilization with research and how have these been mitigated or leveraged?
- How might top-down engagement or bottom-up mobilization of the public be enabled by science policies, e.g. in relation training, incentives or funding?
- What can be done to identify and address biases arising from the digital divide/digital poverty and how might underrepresented groups be better connected to engagement and mobilization efforts?

- Case studies
 - Li-Yin Liu (University of Dayton): Taiwan’s National Epidemic Prevention
 - Felicity Callard (University of Glasgow): Patients engagement during the COVID-19 crisis
- Discussion
 - Barbara Prainsack (University of Vienna)

15:30-15:35 Short Break

15:35-16:15 Session 4. Building confidence and long-term trust

Trust in science and in science-based policies is critical for successfully addressing major crises. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing societal tensions, with trust in science, scientific institutions and individual scientists variously increasing or decreasing in different countries and population groups. Trust in science underpins the successful implementation of, and public adherence to, public health and social measures and is largely determined by relationships between scientists and scientific institutions, policy makers and the public. Communication intermediaries (e.g. journalists and participants on social media platforms) play a critical role at the nexus between these different actors.

This session will build on the earlier sessions and explore what policy measures and actions might be taken to promote confidence and trust in science in the longer-term. What is the role of different actors and how can they work together more effectively to improve mutual understanding and trust?

Overarching questions:

- What roles might different system actors play in cooperating and collaborating to improve mutual understanding and trust during emergency response and in peacetime?
- What are the most significant learnings that policymakers and scientists can adopt from efforts made during COVID-19 to improve public communication, engagement and mobilization efforts for future emergency response and during peacetime?
- To what extent is there a need for public communication and engagement approaches to be tailored to different population groups based? How might this be done effectively to maintain and rebuild trust?

- Panel discussion with all previous session speakers and panellists

Concluding comments from the co-chairs