



Working with the Media – Summary Report

Introduction

The Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre (Sciencewise-ERC) aims to create excellence in public engagement and to inspire and inform better policy in science and technology by helping policy makers commission and use public dialogue in emerging areas of science and technology. The Sciencewise-ERC is funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

Sciencewise-ERC provides practical support to policy makers and over the past year has undertaken innovative research into six key strategic issues in public dialogue.

This summary is one of a series of six covering research undertaken by Sciencewise-ERC.

This report summarises the research into whether working effectively with media can lead to increased participation and wider dissemination of findings.

The research was carried out by Melanie Smallman, a member of the Sciencewise-ERC Dialogue and Engagement Specialist team.

Others in the series:

- Enabling and Sustaining Citizen Involvement (Diane Beddoes)
- Widening Public Involvement in Dialogue (Pippa Hyam)
- The Use of Experts in Public Dialogue (Suzannah Lansdell)
- Evidence Counts – Understanding the Value of Public Dialogue (Diane Warburton)
- Departmental Dialogue Index (Lindsey Colbourne)

Copies of the full research report, and others in the series are available www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk

Summary

One of the challenges of public engagement activities to date has been publicising the events to a wider audience – to increase participation and to disseminate the findings further. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is difficult to engage the mass media – even when the dialogues were likely to generate controversy.

This research asked whether this view was right and whether policy makers can be more effective in working with journalists, through a review of media coverage of public dialogue and interviews with journalists and science communicators.

A number of learning points have been identified to help policy makers and dialogue practitioners engage more effectively with the media.

These include:

- From the start, be honest about whether and when it is worth chasing media coverage – do you really need it and is your activity newsworthy enough?
- Your organisation's press office, or other PR professionals, can help you identify opportunities and draw up a plan. Involve them from the start
- Besides newspapers, TV and radio, there is a growing world of online media which can help you engage directly with citizens
- Opportunities might arise during the course of the project, so monitor media interest and coverage throughout

Process

In order to investigate...

the issues of reporting public dialogue by the media, this study set out to explore a number of crucial questions:

- Is the view that journalists do not want to get involved in reporting dialogue accurate or a misconception?
- Is there a role for the media in being involved in the dialogue process itself – or merely in reporting on the outcomes?

- Are there techniques that can be used to make public dialogue more appealing to the media?
- Can, and should, policy makers and dialogue professionals work more closely with journalists to improve coverage?
- If journalists remain uninterested in covering public dialogue activities, are there alternative means of gaining publicity that bypass the mainstream media?

To explore these questions, we talked to journalists and science communicators, as well as carrying out a review of recent media coverage of public dialogue.



Findings

From the review of media coverage of public dialogue from mid 2007 to mid 2008, we found that the mainstream news media appears to be uninterested in reporting dialogues unless they touch upon politically charged issues. Where interest has been shown, this has been mainly at the beginning and the end of the process – in other words, the announcement of the project and a report of its eventual outcomes. There seems to be little appetite among national newspaper, radio and TV journalists to cover dialogue in a way that would ‘enable’ or ‘encourage’ the public to sign up to the process and take part.

Follow-up research with individual journalists reinforced the view that the process of dialogue (or the fact that it’s happening) was of very little interest to them. Some suggested that a public dialogue might be more newsworthy if it was linked to new research findings or to a political announcement.

Most of the journalists interviewed shared the view that their role was primarily to be independent and not to ‘help’ people to take part. Some conceded that if the topic was of sufficient interest, they might want to host a similar debate on their own website. Although newspapers and the media do become involved in campaigning on behalf of their readers on a range of issues, the overwhelming view was that the media did not have a role in promoting dialogue between the Government and the public.

Science communicators who took part in this study agreed with this perspective. However, many suggested that despite this, communicators might be able to sharpen up their practice so that more impact can be made on, and through, the mass media. This was explored through examining a real life case study, the Sciencewise-funded ‘drugsfutures’ project, which examined the societal and ethical impacts of future drug use.

As a result of talking to journalists and to those whose job it is to communicate science to the public, as well as the case study, a number of learning points have been identified to help policy makers and dialogue practitioners engage more effectively with the media. These can be summarised as follows:

- Expectations should be realistic from the outset as to how newsworthy the dialogue is, and whether it is worth spending time pursuing media involvement



If it’s more difficult to promote public dialogue in the media, we need to make sure that we only use the most appropriate and creative media relations techniques

Science Communicator at the Sciencewise-ERC workshop, October 2008.



- Where possible, expert public relations (PR) professionals should be involved who can identify opportunities and draw up a coherent publicity and communications strategy
- If mainstream media coverage is a key part of the dialogue process, it is worth considering trying to enlist a specific ‘media partner’ as they are more likely to provide the coverage needed
- Spokespeople should be appointed who are trained in delivering the messages that need to be communicated, not just trained in explaining their science clearly
- Flexibility and creativity are needed to seek out possible publicity opportunities
- Local media are much more likely to cover a dialogue if the subject impacts locally or involves local people
- If the dialogue in itself is unlikely to attract media attention, other avenues or news ‘hooks’ surrounding the subject should be explored
- Alternative media should be explored, including digital and online, to engage directly with citizens
- Interest and coverage should be monitored and followed up to make sure that further publicity opportunities are not lost.

Outside the mainstream national, regional and local media, the study found that, given the rapid increase in the consumption of digital media, online media (particularly social media) offer huge opportunities for generating interest in dialogue and engagement activities. It does, however, require communication professionals to rethink how they approach publicity and marketing, reconsidering traditional news values and news ‘hooks’. They also need to understand how blurred the line can become between one-way communication and two-way dialogue.

The study considered the issues that digital media raise for dialogue practitioners and science communicators involved with public dialogue. Key questions include:

- Whether user-generated content and discussions can be a source of suitable intelligence for policy makers and dialogue practitioners
- Whether an up-dated understanding of target audiences is needed to enable this channel to be used more effectively

- Whether it would be appropriate or desirable to develop an online 'debating chamber' to host Government dialogues, where people are able to 'drop in' when they have something to ask or contribute
- Whether further work is needed to consider the 'rules of engagement' for an independent media functioning in the context of a more participatory democracy.

As a result of the research undertaken in this study, a tentative 'recipe' for exploiting digital communications has been identified, which can be tested in upcoming dialogues and from which feedback can be gathered.



Contacts and links

This research was carried out by Melanie Smallman, a member of the Sciencewise-ERC Dialogue and Engagement Specialist team.

For further information, please contact Sciencewise-ERC by email at enquiries@sciencewise-erc.org.uk or by phone on 0870 190 6324.

The full report is available through Sciencewise-ERC at www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk