reTHINK

#sci**comm**

RETHINK brief for science communicators:

Improving your digital science communication

Do you find it easy to communicate about science? Most scientists and communication professionals don't.

Communicating science is not a simple task in a complex, digital environment where the public opinion in Europe to a large extend is formed. We all digest and use information according to our mindsets and beliefs, and we do not just absorb the information that is presented to us. This phenomenon – sensemaking – is a major challenge in the digital communication 'ecosystem' if we want to use scientific knowledge in decision making processes, and if we want all actors in society to participate in discussions about science.

The RETHINK project has addressed this problem, and the latest insights from the project show that we still have a way to go. There is a tendency for science communicators to do one-way communication, wanting to inform the public and not necessary with the aim of creating actual conversations between researchers and the public. Also, scientists and science communicators often lack time and resources for communication activities and experience a sense of disconnect with their audiences.

Based on the findings in the project, the RETHINK project has these pieces of advice for you, when you as a scientist, journalist, or sci comm professional communicate about science:

1. **Train** your skills with special focus on in reflexive and digital science communication.

2. **Engage** in dialogue with the intended audiences to explore their perspectives so that the science communication is tailored to their life situations.

3. **Go to** where your target audience is rather than expecting that you will reach them through broadcasting via newspapers, social media etc.

4. **Consult or partner** with organizations or community groups that already work with or organize your audiences, like activists, advocacy groups and youth communities.

5. **Join** organizations and attend events where researchers and science communicators network and share experiences and knowledge on (reflexive) science communication.

6. **Reflect** on your role as a science communicator
   - What role are you playing and why? Are you just passing on information? Or are you perhaps a convenor, trying to bring together scientists and non-specialist to discuss science?
   - Who is your target group and how do you make sure to reach it?
   - How is your relation to your audience and how does that affect your praxis?
   - What do you expect from your audience and how does that affect your praxis?
   - Do you consider whether your communication is a one-way or two-way street?

Research findings:

"The will is there but the conditions are not"

Throughout its project period, RETHINK has investigated:

1. The landscape of communicators in terms of who communicates what to whom, how, why and on which conditions,
2. The dynamics of how people make sense of complex science-related problems, and
3. Science communication training and quality.

This research shows that the **science communication ecosystem is very complex and fragmented,** including multiple types of actors of which a majority tends to perform one-way communication, **wanting to inform audiences already interested in science about facts.** (See Annex I: different roles of science communicators)

Such tendency creates a barrier for creating a productive relationship between science and society, as s**ensemaking practices are heavily dependent on people's personal situations**, emotions, a priori beliefs and trust in the source.

This means that making sense of science-related issues is not merely a matter of getting the facts straight but is dependent on which personal contexts these facts are put into, how they relate to what people already know, and what the relationship between the communicator and the audience is. The importance of context also makes it **difficult to identify generalizable quality criteria for science communication**, which might be one of the reasons why there is great variety in how academic programs are structured and professional science communicators are trained.

Having said this, the project also shows that the ways in which people make sense of science are dynamic and constantly renewed, which in combination with the diverse and vast science communication landscape provides **a potential for creating constructive dialogues and interactions between science and society.**

Moreover, **many scientists do feel an intrinsic motivation and sense of responsibility to engage in science communication** and want to democratize science. But they find it **hard to reach out to new audiences** and often communicate to people with pre-existing interest in science, which reproduces inequalities in access to knowledge. Also, the **potential of new media settings is not always exploited**, even though most science communicators regularly use mainstream social media.

Scientists and science communicators in general often **lack time and resources for communication activities** and experience **a sense of disconnect with their audiences**, which is demotivating as well as bad and non-constructive interactions online causing them to limit their engagement in dialogues. So, despite attempts from science communicators to create productive interactions between science and society, willingness, and good intensions, **they face a lot of structural barriers for doing so**.

Therefore, RETHINK encourages all actors to take a close look at the proposed recommendations, continuing the efforts to ensure the best match between the achievements of science and the needs, values, and aspirations of society.

Visit the RETHINK project website for more information on the research results:
rethinkscicomm.eu

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