



Communicating sciences

Science and society

Dr. Richard Holliman

I am here with Alan Irwin from the Copenhagen Business School and we are going to do a short interview about the relationship between science and society. Alan Irwin, how would you describe this relationship?

Alan Irwin

I have two different feelings about science in society really. On the one hand it's a very good way of trying to get a sense of what the wider issues might be. So you get the notion that you must connect science in society rather than just assume for example that science can just sit all independent and on its own. So that's very beneficial. The down side is, and now I am beginning to answer your question, that it can suggest that science is just one thing and we know that's not true. Whether you are in physics or biology or chemistry there isn't just one thing even in that area.

Dr. Richard Holliman

So would you be more comfortable with sciences as opposed to society?

Alan Irwin

I guess it's about sciences isn't it? It's about scientific expertise. But then again you have got to say that science can be quite different when it's conducted for example in an industrial laboratory compared to in a university facility. So definitely sciences. Words like 'heterogeneous' tend to come in. Which I guess is a complicated way of saying that there are lots of different activities going on within that label.

And on society of course every social scientist, writing about anything just about since the 1980's, is going to tell us that society isn't just one thing either. So you have got this quite complicated picture of different areas of science, society going through lots of change. And I think particularly in this area about science communication the idea of course and you will read this again and again, that there is no such thing as the public singular. There are many different publics and even one individual can find herself a member of several publics at the same time.

So at least the idea of 'it's publics' suggests, well, who exactly are we talking about here? Are we talking about medical patients? Are we talking about people in the work place? Are we talking about a community? There's lots of different publics at play.

Dr. Richard Holliman

Would you say that there has been a significant set of changes in this relationship in recent years and what might they be if you could characterise those?

Alan Irwin

I think yeah it is quite striking in many ways. If you go back to the late '90's until today you can see quite a transformation. And one way of putting this is if you had asked me, if we had been sitting here in 1990 having this discussion I wouldn't at all have seen the way in which talk of public engagement for example was going to become so prevalent. I say talk of public engagement because, as I'm sure we will discuss, there are many issues about how that talk converts into practice.

But I definitely didn't think that was coming and certainly if you go back to the Eighties, finding out what for example was even talked about on a scientific advisory committee was very

difficult. We often had to go to the States to get access, to get information from the States, and then recreate what the situation must have been in Britain. Whereas now these committees meet in public. It's all on the website and there is a much greater degree of openness. You can attend public meetings. So I think that is a change, certainly in the way in which institutions think about these things compared to the way they were done say in the mid 1990's.

Dr. Richard Holliman

So would you say you are more confident about this relationship now than perhaps you would have been in 1990?

Alan Irwin

Confident – I think certainly you see changes you see in many ways a move to greater openness, institutions have a lot of enthusiasm now to explain what they are doing to wider publics, in a way that you would not have seen that before. So I think those personally are good things. I mean I think it's better, it draws people into debate and in some ways it creates a greater degree of confidence. The hesitancy you can hear in my voice of course is because well it's this word 'talk' isn't it? To what degree have these changes really shifted the way in which institutions approach these issues? So is this just a fancy form of PR [public relations] or are we talking about substantial changes? And my answer to that one is quite frankly is the jury is out. You can see partial progress. You can see areas where definitely some good initiatives have taken place. But you can see many areas where it's harder to see substantial changes. It's as if you have gone from the old deficit theory based on public ignorance to a new deficit theory, which says if we do these things the public will learn to trust us, and then we can just get on with what we wanted to do anyway.

Dr. Richard Holliman

So would you characterise that as the greatest challenge facing public engagement with science?

Alan Irwin

I think that's a good point. Yeah I think I would agree with that, that it's a question of, now we have all got into this new language of openness, admitting uncertainty, the importance of engaging with the public, the importance of, well it's a two-way thing, the importance of trusting the publics in order that they will trust the institutions. Now that we've got all those things, really embedding them in practice, I want to say it's a challenge, but I want to say that isn't a straightforward thing. If you look at a research Council or a scientific body, there are real substantial questions there about okay, 'we can debate with the public but what now do we do as a consequence'? It just doesn't track one to one. So on the one hand I am very critical of the lack of change but at the same time you have to realise there are good reasons for that. It's not always easy and the public as we said already doesn't speak with one voice. There are many different signals come out of that.

Dr. Richard Holliman

If you could characterise one or two of the main reasons why you think that that has changed in the UK what would they be?

Alan Irwin

Well the simple answer is to look at things like BSE, Mad Cow Disease, because certainly the story of BSE neatly straddles the move from the early Nineties when you can characterise the government reaction is 'don't confuse the public with uncertainty'. I mean that's quite a well-established thing. You heard a lot of that in the Eighties. 'If we don't know the facts then we shouldn't be worrying people unduly'. But I think that was quite sincere. It looks wrong now but it was quite sincere at the time.

So, by the end of the Nineties with the eventual outcome on BSE about human deaths and infections, you had the way in which a new labour government came in, very committed to opening out; having focus groups, etc. that was also part of that change. That's a very simple

way of putting it. And I wouldn't like to say BSE did it because BSE could have been interpreted in lots of different ways. But the one common conclusion drawn within government was that old way of keeping the facts tight and trying to reassure the public simply backfires and you can't start off being certain and gradually admit uncertainty because that always makes it look like you are holding back information. But, you know, BSE could have been interpreted as. 'we need more experts'. You know, 'the old experts screwed up and now we need better experts'. It didn't have to be seen as part of that trust and openness.