



Science Communication and Public Engagement

The role of the Royal Institution

Narrator (vo):

As science has grown and developed, so has the relationship with its audience.

Baroness Susan Greenfield

Some might think that given that we've been going now for over 200 years, has the role of the RI changed? I think the answer is yes and no. There's a lovely quote from one of my favourite books, *The Leopard*, things have to change in order that they can stay the same. And I think what stays the same is the commitment of the Royal Institution to, in the words of our charter, 'diffuse science for the common purposes of life'. We still do exhibitions and we still do demonstrations, but the emphasis has shifted now, not so much to actually showing the science, because you can't really show genes very easily, you can't cut up brains very easily. Many of the aspects of the excitement of science nowadays would either be unethical or expensive or inaccessible or very hard to demonstrate on a bench.

Narrator (Vo):

But the public relationship has altered significantly since the Faraday period.

Dr Isobel Falconer

We see a huge optimism growing through the 19th Century that science provides a way forward and is... and is authoritative and it gives true correct answers. Today in the twenty-first century, that position is very much eroded.

Baroness Susan Greenfield

There is a shift now to empowering the public to have ideas and to talk and think on. Nowadays of course, we have excellent science TV programmes and excellent science books, so people can access information in a easy to understand way. But what they can't do is answer back. They can't interrogate the scientists, they can't challenge and question and think and dream. And I think our role here, although it's within the bailiwick of diffusing science for the common purposes of life, is now not so much to demonstrate with simple lectures and explain, but to engage and discuss and reflect.

Dr Isobel Falconer

I think scientists are having to work harder to bolster their position as authoritative. Since Faraday's time we have achieved technological mastery which gives us types of power that were undreamed of, power to change things, wreck things. That's the other reason why scientists are having to engage with the public today, is to sort out the moral and ethical positions and how far science can go, where it should go, where it can't go because that's not ethical.

Baroness Susan Greenfield

I think in the twenty-first century the scientist has to come in from the cold. In the...in the last century perhaps they got away with being in their ivory towers as the boffin, as the dysfunctional nerd and all those other stereotypes that are applied to scientists. I think now, in the words of Carl Sagan, that's not possible, he said, and he's a sadly now deceased astronomer: "It is suicide to live in a society dependent on science and technology where virtually no-one knows anything about science and technology."