

# Report from the E.U. meeting

## “Life Sciences communication in the media”

*EU Meeting under the aegis of the EGLS\* - Brussels - 9th July 2002*

### BACKGROUND

Media coverage of science in the EU varies in both quality and quantity and from country to country. Developments in the life sciences have, in general, made the headlines only if associated with a ‘breakthrough’ or a controversy. When this happens, the press quickly moves away from purely informative coverage to foster instead a widespread debate on possible implications and risks of the technology under scrutiny, and this can be very confusing for the public. Typical results of such confusing information are the misinformation, suspicion and hostility that surround the introduction of innovative products based on recombinant DNA technology, particularly GM foods and crops; although for the development of new medical drugs and treatments, public views are more favourable – as documented by the Eurobarometer surveys<sup>1</sup>.

This communication problem is now well recognised. At both national and EU levels there has been a significant increase in activities broadly described as ‘Public Understanding of Science’. Initiatives have taken place throughout Europe and the EU is also actively playing its role in this respect<sup>2</sup>. In the UK for instance, these activities include a very substantial increase in the amount of science on television and radio, a much higher profile by the British Association for the Advancement of Science, including the very successful “Science and Technology week” and the media training of many scientists, both junior and senior. However many of the activities launched are based on the ‘deficit model’, that is, the assumption that the public is ignorant and that when they are informed, they will agree with the scientists; and not only that, they will want governments and the EU to fund science better. This view still has advocates in the scientific community and is often the unspoken starting point for their discussions. There are other problems: science teaching in most school systems is not doing well, and it appears that scientists are still neither listening nor responding to the public’s real concerns. In contrast, science journalists see their role as being to question the scientists and their findings, not just to explain the science. What can be done to improve this situation? One suggestion that has been made is that the situation might be improved if the scientific community itself set up a central service facility that could draw together, simplify and express in lay language the vast amount of complex information that science generates. But there must be other useful things that could be done, and it was to explore such ideas that the workshop was set up.

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\* The European Group on the Life Sciences (EGLS) is a high level group of academic experts on the life sciences appointed in 2000 by European Commissioner for Research Philippe Busquin, to advise him on matters relating to the life sciences and related policy matters, in particular those touching upon public communication. Two EGLS members, Professors Derek Burke and Leonardo Santi have been instrumental in the organisation of this meeting.

<sup>1</sup> Eurobarometer surveys focussing upon biotechnology – knowledge, attitudes – have been carried out in years 1991, 93, 96, 99; the next is planned for later in 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Among activities supported by the EC one might mention the European Initiative for Biotechnology Education, details at <<http://www.rdg.ac.uk/EIBE/>>; and the activities of the European Federation of Biotechnology’s Task Group on Public Perceptions of Biotechnology, details at <<http://www.efbpublic.org>>.

## **TWO CRAFTS SEPARATED BY A COMMON INTEREST**

Some 40 journalists, communication experts and scientists from 13 different countries, together with representatives of the Commission (including Commissioner Busquin), participated in the one-day meeting. First, scientific journalists, working in a variety of different European cultural contexts, outlined their constraints, their needs, their concerns, and their interests. Then the scientists, who are increasingly aware of their need to communicate, expressed their difficulties and concerns, in particular, the lack of appropriate interfaces.

From the outset of the meeting, it was clear that the two crafts, although both interested in effective communication of the life sciences, have very distinct aims. The primary objective of researchers is to produce results and increase knowledge in a given scientific area, receiving public recognition for this from their scientific peers. On the other hand, the primary objective of scientific commentators is to write articles, documentaries, etc that are of interest to the public – newspapers have to sell to survive. In a democratic society their role is to inform in the way that appeals most to their public on all the changes that science is bringing or could bring to everyday life. It is not to educate the public! It was agreed that headlines which sound harsh, sensationalist and are sometimes misleading will still be written because that's how the press works. The journalists stressed that they are story-tellers, not official mouth-pieces. For example, there is little interest in the news that thousands of planes are landing safely every day – the interesting story is when one crashes. So journalists are always seeking a story, an angle, which will catch the reader's attention; and if science seeks greater coverage, it will have to respond to such demands. It was agreed that it was important not to try to dilute or merge these differences – but rather, accepting the tension, ensure that both specialisms respect the other.

The participants then concentrated on a single question: how to improve the quality of the scientific information offered to the public.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **1. Launching detailed studies on science communication in Europe;**

While there is plenty of information available on the European media and audience dynamics – for the benefit of the advertising companies – there is only sketchy data available on the specific appeal of scientific information to the general public.

**Recommendation:** A European wide study, along the lines of the Eurobarometer, with the following objectives:

- Evaluation of the extent and effectiveness of the life science coverage by newspapers in say 4 EU countries, looking at all segments of the market.
- Identification of the issues that most attract media coverage in the life sciences.

- Identification of which issues most alarm the public and why.

## **2. Increasing awareness of respective needs and constraints**

We consider that both scientists and media people would certainly interact more proactively if exposed, even for a short period, to the working experience of the other.

**We recommend:**

- The identification of a number of laboratories which could be opened for short periods for journalists to work in, accompanied by appropriate funding.

## **3. More proactive engagement of researchers in the public debate**

It is the scientists themselves who are in one of the best positions to understand the possible implications of the new knowledge they are generating. Researchers will only take time from their busy schedules to improve their mastering of lay language, to produce feature articles or to take part in communication events on key life sciences issues **if appropriately rewarded**. Presently the situation is practically the reverse. Scientists need to concentrate on high quality research, get it published in high-impact scientific journals and chase the next grant; they believe that they have no time left to devote to public communication, and such activities rarely gain respect in academic circles.

### **Recommendations:**

- Media workshops for scientists.
- The establishment of career awards and rewards to good communicators in life science.
- EC funded science journalism and science communication courses for scientists considering making a new career, to encourage more scientifically qualified people to enter professional science communication.
- Fellowships for practising scientists to engage in communication activities while remaining active in science.
- Prizes for scientific communicators, both scientists and journalists.

## **4. Closer interfaces and networking of media and bioscience information relays;**

It has been reported that science commentators needing to gather information on specific issues often rely almost exclusively on NGOs and other advocacy groups: these are very much media-minded, often present in several countries and very responsive. This is obviously not always a healthy situation, since these organisations have a political agenda and normally are not directly involved in research. On the other hand it is not always easy for journalists to find a reliable source of scientific information at national and international level, nor is it easy for busy scientists to respond at short notice to media requests. To meet this problem, some bioscience specialised media centres have been and are being created, to gather relevant and high quality information from the

scientific community and to structure this information primarily for the media. For example, there is a pressing need for exhaustive, reliable fact sheets on a huge variety of subjects. This information should be readily available (i.e. through the net) and translated into the different EU languages. Networking of these centres should be supported to help them share resources and experiences.

### **Recommendations**

- Identification of the science media centres currently working in the EU, evaluation of their strategies, and of their strengths and weaknesses,
- Definition and funding of a network to enable such centres to exchange best practise and to identify ways in which they might assist each other.

## **5. Recognising science journalism specificity**

Science commentators need their professional status to be recognised – there were complaints that for practical or other opportunistic reasons, scientific matters are sometimes covered by political or other journalists with very limited knowledge and rigour. This often raises doubts and ambiguities.

### **Recommendations**

- Establishment of high profile prizes for consistently high quality science coverage.

## **6. Fostering a more proactive role in the communication process by the research institutions.**

Universities, research institutions and learned societies should be encouraged and helped to be much more proactive vis-à-vis the media and the society at large. In particular they need to anticipate issues likely to foster public concern. In addition they should also guarantee proper scientific behaviour by their research staff with regard to communication thus reducing the risk of false or excessive claims, and helping to restore the image of scientists.

### **Recommendations**

- Establish selection procedures and granting provisions from funding agencies that take into due account the above requirements; setting up procedures for the documentation and sharing of experiences or good practice.

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3 [http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/cnc/2002/com2002\\_0027en01.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/cnc/2002/com2002_0027en01.pdf)

4 <http://www.cordis.lu/science-society>