The Quality of Public Dialogue

Scientists are increasingly asked by funders and governments to engage the public. They are no longer expected merely to “teach” the public what they are presumed to need to know. Rather, we now know that a less hierarchical process, in which both parties listen and learn, has greater impact. A critical strand of this public engagement with science involves policy-makers, who are increasing their dialogue with the public to help make wiser decisions about how society uses science. These changes in communication are important because issues like climate change and health are in the political mainstream and affect everyone. But these dialogues must be of a high standard; otherwise, time is wasted, the public lose trust in science, and bad policy decisions result. So, what constitutes good dialogue?

Public dialogue is valuable when it helps policy-makers hear the views of people who have no prior or vested interest. It can challenge assumptions, explore long-term impacts, generate ideas, tease out the nature of public concerns before polarized positions emerge, and help broaden consideration of the issues. Dialogue is not about the public making decisions about science policy; that is for policy-makers. Neither is it formal public consultation, nor is it an open platform for debates that can polarize participants or be hijacked by lobby groups or stakeholders (although their perspectives are important to consider).

For public dialogue to be credible, the public need to be given realistic expectations about what will happen after the process concludes, as well as feedback about its impact. And the conversations must begin early enough to inform decisions. Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth recently criticized how the UK government engaged the public this year on nuclear power, saying that decisions had already been made, thus potentially shaking public confidence in science.

There needs to be good practice in dialogue. Participants should have time to think issues through, and to become well-informed through reliable and balanced resources. Different viewpoints and expert input—not just from scientists, but from others such as journalists, stakeholders, social scientists, and ethicists—are essential. Participants should explore aspirations and concerns, and ultimately, questions should be open (“How do we provide for our energy needs in the future?”), rather than closed (“Should we build new nuclear power stations?”).

What is being done to improve public dialogue? In December 2006, the British government committed funding for an Expert Resource Centre for Public Dialogue in Science, led by the program Scienceswise. The goal is to help the United Kingdom produce better policies. So far, over 3000 people have been involved, around £2 million has been spent, and learning is being shared across government departments. UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown also launched a series of citizens’ juries in September 2007, promising to harness the “experience and wisdom” of the British people to tackle policy challenges. And a month earlier in the United States, thousands of people from all backgrounds and ages gathered in small groups to discuss health care. Through “CaliforniaSpeaks,” the public was enabled to tell state lawmakers about desired reforms, and as a result, the governor is reconsidering health policies. These are good starts.

What about scientists involved in dialogue as experts? In the case of Scienceswise, good interaction with scientists is described by participants as a “privilege,” whereas a pompous scientist presenting issues obscurely can be the “worst aspect.” Scientists should give clear explanations, be open-minded rather than defensive, and be prepared to discuss their ethical views. Although relatively few scientists are involved in dialogue, the wider scientific community gains from hearing about such discussions; it helps them to better understand the public and may even inspire research ideas.

As with any successful dialogue, the parties involved need to rise to the occasion. If governments are to make wise science-policy decisions—national and global—and are seriously open to public views, then they must engage the public at the right time, based on good practice. And if the public take the time to think, discuss, and become informed about issues, their observations can help science to better serve society.

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