

Brief Report: Science, Society and the Media¹

*Niceas Schamp**

The Committee on Science and Technology of the Royal Flemish Academy of Science and the Arts created in 2003 a working group, called 'Science, society and the media' in order to examine how young people could be interested in science, and persuaded to choose a scientific career; and also how to inform the public at large about science more widely, so that they can judge better about scientific-social problems. Clearly, both these objectives overlap but also further each other. The working group came up with following recommendations:

General recommendations

- The authorities are urged to pursue their efforts for science communication, and even to enhance them, if possible.
- Industry can have an active share in these initiatives and needs to be encouraged to really join in.
- It is recommended to co-ordinate and centralize the scattered initiatives – whether organized by the authorities, industry, the universities, scientific institutions, or the Academy.
- Careful monitoring of the effects will prove very helpful to the effectiveness of the activities. Therefore it is desirable to have all the initiatives followed-up by one organization.
- Initiatives to promote science communication do cost a lot of money. It is absurd to undertake any action if the authorities are not willing to set aside the necessary budgets. Continuity and integration are to be preferred above single and scattered initiatives.

Work in progress

The actions under way can be split up according to the target groups and the various channels of information involved, such as the media, education,

*Dr. Niceas Schamp is permanent secretary of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts.

¹Address to the academic session 'Science and Media' at the ALLEA General Assembly, 2004.

science centres, researchers and industry. The following current or starting actions deserve particular attention for further development.

Media

- Television and radio, as well as the written press, are invited to continue their often very successful programmes and publications on science. Such programmes are a major asset for the popularisation on Science and deserve general support. Also non-specialist periodicals and magazines, together with the scientific sections in newspapers ought to be fully supported.
- Special training programmes for science journalists offer training and coaching in the field of written and oral communication, high-risk communication, digital communication, written reports about research, and radio and television training.

Education

- In primary education, the 'hands on' approach is the very best – if not the only way – to arouse the pupils' interest in science, via playful means such as action packages, science theatre and puppet shows.
- Methods to counsel science teachers better should be pursued. To cite just a few examples, 'seminars' for teachers in industry and scientific institutions, or, why not, training in the enterprises themselves.
- European and 'olympic' contests should be better promoted, and pupils have to be prompted to really take part in them.
- The Centres for Students' Counselling ought to bring the potential of a scientific career to the fore.

Science centres

- The tremendous success of interactive science centres demonstrates that the impact of such centres cannot be overrated, not only for the youngsters but also for their parents. Consequently, they deserve to be fully supported not only by the authorities, but by industrial partners and anybody concerned with science as well.

Universities and researchers

- Universities and researchers in general have to be convinced of the importance of science communication vis-à-vis the media and the public at large. The appointment of a science 'go between' could be a solution. In

this connection we are referring, once again, to the usefulness of a training centre such as WeCom.

Industry

- Industry itself is the first partner interested in an ever-increasing technical education. It is bound to have an active share in this domain. It can do so by means of 'open days' (and therefore needn't wait for the 'official' day of technology to be organized). It can also organize locally conducted tours in a factory, initiated by themselves. Some other means are the organization of teachers' days and practical training.

Internet

- Information centres, or 'Science Shops', where students and other people interested can find an answer to questions of a scientific and/or technical nature, are of the utmost importance for the scientific 'literacy' of the community.

New actions ahead or to be planned

Media

- Serials featuring scientists could be quite an innovation comparable with the doctors' 'soap operas', which tend to flood our TV programmes. However, this time the leading part is played by a scientist from a non-medical discipline, who is deeply engaged in a research project and who is about to make a pioneering discovery in his field. It might well be a thrilling story, in which the dreams, bad luck, intrigues and successes the untiring researcher experiences, are the focal point. And why not add a slight romantic flavour?
- Docudramas about the life stories of famous scientists – either dead or still living – could well generate fascinating episodes.
- News items in connection with natural phenomena, environmental disasters, new discoveries, accidents with chemical products are more informative when they are embedded in scientific information. But then, of course, that background needs to be exact. Here, both the world of researchers and of academies have to play a major role.

Education

- A constant link between science and daily life is necessary for young people to be attracted to the sciences and, possibly, to a scientific career. Not only will this arouse their interest, but it will also demonstrate the great impact of science on society.
- The gap with technology can be bridged if the respective school curricula of the humanities and the science subjects are better geared to one another. Why not deal with the (sometimes dominant) influence of new findings on society in the history classes, and, *vice versa*, demonstrate their effect on society in the science classes?

Industry

- The contacts with science, the foundations of which are made in secondary education and which, very regrettably, quickly disappear afterwards, can probably be kept by means of information leaflets that explain, at the level of secondary education, the effects of medical drugs, detergents, adhesives, etc., or for that matter how appliances operate, such as GSM, a microwave oven, DVD, GPS, a rechargeable toothbrush, and the like.

One more general suggestion

- It is advisable to establish a High Council for Science Communication in order to join the efforts of all the 'actors' involved, such as universities and colleges of higher education (or polytechnics), industry, scientific institutions and academies.