

Report: Workshop on “Public Awareness of Research Infrastructures”

Garching 18.-19. June 2015

Scope of the workshop

A common task of large-scale research infrastructures (RIs) is to disseminate their achievements and capabilities to funding bodies and the scientific community, as well as the general public. Similar expectations regarding Public Relations (PR) concern large public funded projects like Integrated Infrastructure Initiatives (EU) or other big consortia (national and international projects). This workshop brought together representatives of funding agencies, facility and project managers, press officers and social researchers to discuss the needs and expectations of dissemination activities. It had nearly 90 attendees and featured over 30 talks.

The workshop aimed to answer, amongst others, the following questions:

- How is PR organised and performed at research infrastructures?
- What do the funding organisations expect from PR activities at large RIs?
- What are the experiences of PR officers, journalists, and social researchers?

Main outcomes:

- PR and dissemination activities are of the utmost importance to convey the value and impact of RIs, attract young people to science and train them to cope with the great challenges of modern society, and to support technological innovation by outreach to industry. PR activities can be vital for securing public acceptance of an existing or planned research facility.
- Communication management. RIs need a long-term view with regards to communication. It is about building relationships, a brand and a narrative, over many years in some cases. RIs deal with many thousands of experiments – there is no single big story, but many hundreds of smaller ones - this is both a challenge and an opportunity. To achieve good PR outcomes at different levels, it is important to have sufficient resources and strong support from the management and the scientific and technical staff at the RI. To promote and inform people about the activities and results of RIs they need to show evidence of the impact of their science on society. Messages should inspire confidence, in particular with regards to big projects where considerable funding is necessary. RIs need to be credible and transparent, and demonstrate they have the necessary means and resources (including the technical knowhow, management and monitoring) to conduct and finalise projects timely and efficiently. This might require engagement of the stakeholders and targeted communication about the impact of research infrastructures, rather than only engaging the public with science.

- Tailored material. Outreach and dissemination material should, where possible, be tailored to different stakeholders such as the general public, decision makers, the media, scientists, teachers and schools, as well as to the country/region where information will be promoted. It should also take into consideration cultural differences and political sensitivities.
- Science and Politics. The communication between science and politics needs special attention due to different perspectives, methods of work and preconceptions (“politicians never listen and scientists never give clear and simple answers”). A number of things to keep in mind when lobbying are: to be completely transparent and declare your purpose, affiliation and any conflicts of interest upfront; to define target groups, but understand second-order effects; that visibility and presence establish awareness; content and form establish credentials; the need to understand processes and procedures; to be prepared to help; that communication with politicians is a continuous, daily, long-term investment and effort.
- Educational Activities. Educational activities at RIs, such as teacher training, foster long-term in-depth understanding among teachers, especially if conducted in the teachers own mother tongue. These activities have the ability to multiply, through teachers, the number of pupils/students who become aware of science, hence also returning the investment made by funding bodies. Giving students the opportunity to learn about the laboratories (even virtually) is naturally a way to directly influence their awareness of science.
- Public Engagement. It is very important to involve the general public and local communities with RIs, even before the RI is built. Public engagement activities might work better if they succeed in amazing visitors. This can be done in a number of ways: by translating the large scale of the RIs to science fairs and similar events: big science → big exhibitions; by showing “science in action”; by communicating not only what the RI does but how it links to e.g. what universities do and “real world” examples — when you place knowledge about research into a wider social context it becomes possible to generate a ‘higher-level’ understanding of and for particular research goals; and by translating materials into a range of local languages. Traveling exhibitions, where visitors can interact with the exhibition, foster good relations at the local level and increase support in member states at national and international levels. It also reinforces the standing of the local scientific community and creates a perspective of intellectual co-ownership of the research enterprise.
- New communication channels. Traditional science communication is not always sufficient, and it is thus important to explore new channels, such as blogs, online social media, videos, science cafés, dance or cinema events, and other fun events that approach people in different ways and thus attract different audiences that otherwise wouldn’t be interested in learning about RIs or science. New channels can accommodate subjects that classical channels can’t cover. New channels – for instance blogs – are very attractive, especially to youngsters, because they open up the possibility of being part of the research process — all the work done in between the question and the answer, with the frustrations and successes and the challenge of being creative in unknown and unexpected situations. New channels can also address other important aspects associated with research. These cover ordinary human issues (yes, scientists are also human beings with dreams, hopes, aspirations), gender issues, and others.

- Efficient use of resources. Ways to reduce costs and make efficient use of resources are, for instance: to get scientists involved and train them to participate in public engagement events, something that can be fostered by including such activities in their personal work development schemes; to organise several small-scale events that, individually, require less resources, rather than one large, resource-intensive event; to promote grassroots democracy, where change comes from “below”, like in crowd-funded and citizen science projects, which are means by which people can react to a certain problem while simultaneously raising the visibility of a project; and to cooperate with other institutions such as universities at science fairs.
- Risk Communication. Risk communication is arguably the most challenging area of public science communication. It is important to identify the potential risks of running a large scale research infrastructure (financial, technological, or environmental) and to find appropriate ways to communicate these risks to the local community, to the media (which although being a risk also can help bring people’s support), and, most importantly, to be transparent and provide correct and sufficient information.