European Academies

easac

Science Advisory Council

COMMUNICATING SCIENCE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
Webinar on Experiences and Lessons Learned from the European Academies
18 November 2020

Objectives of the webinar

The webinar served two primary objectives:

- to inspire academies to be proactive and effective science communicators in their countries, in particular with respect to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis;
- to advise EASAC on how it can continue to support its member academies in their communication work (e.g. through its Press and Communications Group).

Participants

The webinar attracted over 60 participants from 23 member academies, ALLEA and the Global Young Academy (GYA). Many participants were dedicated press officers or senior academicians and staff with communications responsibility; there were also some researchers at Academies interested in the topic. This made for a diverse exchange of ideas and a rich learning experience.

The webinar was informed by the outcome of a survey on science communications during the pandemic. Of the ca. 30 responses received, it was clear that the capacity of academies to be proactive and effective science communicators varies widely, with just over half having dedicated communications support and over 10% with no provision at all. Whilst many reported that their national publics tend to source their information from public service channels (TV, radio), most academies use primarily their respective websites to communicate information, so there is a potential disconnect between demand and supply. Academies risk depending too much on their own websites, which does not in itself constitute effective outreach. Many academies reported that their communications activities have changed as a result of COVID-19, and this webinar provided a timely opportunity to share good practice and learn from each other in this unprecedented year.

Key messages and lessons learned

1. Amplifying science-based messages (CV-19 and non-CV-19)
- The ongoing COVID-19 crisis **creates opportunities** for academies: - The importance of science-based advice to policy is evident and the demand for clarity and consensus in scientific advice unparalleled.   - The wider public is interested in understanding how science works.   - All academies have a responsibility to contribute to their national science advisory systems and many have the capacity to do so, in different ways.   - To be credible, academies require a **strong media presence**:   - This presence needs to be heard above alternative misleading voices via a multiplicity of channels.   - All academies can intervene according to their capacity ("low cost – high impact" ways of communicating their messages *are* possible).   - Addressing the politicisation of science and those who seek to discredit it are important functions of academies. They do this by combatting lies and clarifying misunderstandings and distortions, by exploiting the power of evidence-based group consensus.   - Academies can personalise and authenticate their messages through their own members/fellows, making science 'relatable' for the public, to scientist individuals.

- o Scientists who are good writers and articulate speakers are crucial, but strong links to senior decision makers in TV, print and other media are also needed.
- o Partnering with other groups in intelligent ways can amplify the messages.
- o Messages may be time limited and linked to the deadline by which a policy decision has to be made, so windows of opportunity may be small: academies must be ready.

2. Working in real time, where the science is incomplete and developing rapidly

Case study: The Royal Society's advice on wearing masks was initially targeted at policy makers and, when no traction could be seen there, re-oriented towards the public, whereupon advice was taken up (also) by the policy community.

- The rapidly evolving nature of the global pandemic illustrates the importance of being **agile and adaptable** in communications approach in order to reach different audiences and have impact. Academies should continue to monitor and review any impact and change their approach as required.
- It pays to **be clear what the message is trying to achieve** and target the audience (those who can effect change) accordingly.
- The limited time window for a message can make it difficult to meet standard scientific processes, such as independent checking of evidence, peer reviews etc. Care is required to **communicate uncertainty** because journalists are trained to seek a balance and to present opposing views, which can put the most widely agreed messages at risk of being undermined by an over-emphasis on minority views.
- There is some anecdotal evidence of journalists seeking out scientists who represent a specific, minority or 'extreme' position, and that **experts with dissenting opinions can be used to manipulate or distort agendas**, and in turn confuse the public. Academies should be alert to this.

3. Addressing competing and/or conflicting (interpretation of) scientific information

Case study: The Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) is not giving any time to fake news or minority scientific views, but instead focusing on strengthening majority scientific views and opening up new channels for their communication.

- Some of the science relating to COVID-19 has been **tentative, potentially contestable, multifaceted or ambiguous**. Competing and/or conflicting scientific information can arise from, for example:
  - o different assumptions made by scientists on epidemiological models, which can have profound effects on their estimates and projections
  - o different disciplinary perspectives: such as epidemiologists and virologists, mathematicians and economists, and social scientists looking at mental health, poverty and social inequity issues
  - o different scientific opinions on effective interventions - such as lockdown timing and methodology, social distancing details and wearing masks.
- There is a **tension** between being open and transparent (for example, in communicating a range of scientific views) and bringing consensus and clarity (communicating the scientific majority view) which can help policy decisions.
- Science represents a **spectrum of debate** and not an absolute. This needs to be conveyed to the public in a way that does not appear to side-step accountability or responsibility.
- **Scientists from different disciplines should respect each other's views** and be open to new ideas and compromise: this will help build/maintain public trust in the science community.
- The global pandemic has made journalists, and to a lesser extent the public, more aware of the **difficulties of making scientific predictions.**
- The **use of new and dedicated communication channels** for communicating clear scientific consensus, such as that set up by the MTA (https://tudomany.hu), together with the use of

popular social media channels, can be powerful. Building direct channels to policy makers, equally so.

- There needs to be a **strong pan-European voice projecting the best majority science in a helpful way**, to supplement and harmonise national voices.

4. Recognising and countering fake news and/or misleading information

- The global pandemic is being accompanied by an 'infodemic', including two waves of misinformation: the first on the origin of the virus (e.g. link to 5G radiation, man made and/or laboratory escape) and the second on interventions (e.g. masks, social distancing etc). Academies can **anticipate the third wave of misinformation** – most likely around the use of vaccines – and **be prepared for it.**
- Academies should be prepared to **recognise and debunk myths and misinformation**, and understand the rationale behind them (often not cognitive, but emotional).
- Interventions can be **short-term and reactive** (identifying which information is misleading and rectifying it) and **longer-term and proactive** (generating accurate news and information).
- Academies and academicians should be more proactive in exploiting opportunities created by social media, especially in reaching younger generations.
- **Don't do it alone!**: academies can create alliances with influential stakeholders, and ideally also with policy makers. This could include pro-science citizen groups or NGOs.

5. Using the right channels to reach different audiences

- Academies should **be clear about the audience(s) they are targeting** and how they should be prioritised. The general public is an indirect route to policy makers (see Royal Society case study above).
- **Audiences are diverse** and can include the general public, journalists, policy makers, medical staff, politicians, science officers in Parliaments and parties.
- There are **evidence-based ways of choosing the 'right' audiences and the most appropriate channels to reach them**[1]. Media outreach is not the same as media impact.
- **In the different European countries, public opinion is shaped by the media through different channels.** Academy capacity will also have some bearing on which media channels to use – and how. National context matters. What might work in one country, may not work in another[2].
- Good communication requires **making a distinction between facts and opinions**, and between the audiences' **use of media and trust in media**.
- **Different media types** (press releases, op-eds, scientific publications, interviews, tweets, infographics, videos, podcasts) **require different approaches**. Traditional media has slightly changed over recent years and nowadays often relies more on a narrative (personification, strong story line) compared to social media.
- Similarly, **public opinion is shaped by different media -** it can be more impactful channelling key messages through several media simultaneously and on different levels (national, European e.g. through EASAC). Key here is to cater to the respective national audience e.g. through translations and by including statements by national academicians/WG members etc.
- **National young academies can help in reaching younger target groups** and may also be more proficient with social media and newer forms of communication.

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[1] For example: European Broadcasting Union (2020) (especially page 24 onwards)
[2] Eurobarometer (2019) charts on media use in the EU (page 9 onwards for overall trend and national comparisons)