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Scientists (mis)understanding the public(s), again!

by SIMON CARTER Mar 9, 2016

In this blog we frequently lament the fact that politicians, policy makers and health educators seem to largely ignore various insights gained from the social sciences and humanities over the past several decades. To this illustrious list I now add the new Royal Society president, Venki Ramakrishnan. In a recent article in the Guardian he does little to buck this trend rehearsing arguments that are now, at least thirty years old and appear to have moved little beyond the discredited deficit model debate (circa 1985). Ramakrishnan is probably putting forward what he believes to be an honest argument and I have no desire to give him a good ‘Fisking’, consisting of ‘savaging his argument and scattering the tattered remnants to the four corners of the internet’. Having said that, some of his points need to be examined more closely, not least because the Royal Society remains a prestigious and influential organisation whose views are taken seriously.

Perhaps the most succinct riposte to Ramakrishnan’s article was that ‘he needs to get out more’. He starts by describing an encounter at a ‘party’ with a couple who prefer talk about the latest novels they have read or the concerts (presumably classical or opera) they have attended rather than molecular biology. This story is both incredibly elitist and dates back to the even older two cultures debate (circa 1959). At parties most people refreshingly talk about cultural products like ‘Sherlock’ or ‘Breaking Bad’ (ironically both contain rather a lot of science). Even at the time the two cultures debate started this was snobbish bunkum and, from an anthropological standpoint, nonsensical. To start the article with this anecdote gives the impression of out of touch ‘club-men’ sitting in leather armchairs complaining about a ‘pop culture’ that had left them behind.

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As if this isn't bad enough, the piece then takes a turn for the worse. Ramakrishnan's next target is the double standard represented by the public outpouring of grief around the death of David Bowie compared to the dearth of heartache around the passing of double Nobel prize winner Fred Sanger. Now admittedly a few people did go overboard in expressing grief for a pop-star they had never met and did not know. But that is the point, to compare a global icon who worked in the entertainment industry and was arguably someone who changed British culture for decades with a scientist who probably actively avoided fame or fortune shows a profound misunderstanding of the culture we inhabit.

The trouble with articles like this, where authors seek to construct an impossible cultural divide between 'science' and 'the rest', is that they treat both the public and science as if they were distinct and separate entities. It should be obvious to even a casual observer that the 'public' in any given region is amazingly diverse. Most of us occupy spaces at the intersections of different genders, changing socio-economic status, cultural heritages, ethnicities, ages, sexual orientations, physical abilities and religious beliefs. And science is itself diverse. It's a fair bet that even in one of the laboratories in which Ramakrishnan works there are a myriad of scientific 'social worlds' occupied by multiple collective actors who are engaged in 'all kinds of negotiations and conflicts [but] committed to usually on-going participation in broad substantive arenas'. If we then step back and consider the many different disciplines that make up 'science', it makes even less sense to talk about science in the singular, as one thing that we all need more of in our lives. For social scientists, historians and anthropologists these insights are so routine that they have become cliché. But it seems that they need continued restating.

It is simply untrue that there is a double standard in the place that science(s) occupies in our culture. On the morning of the 12 February 2016, the day after scientists at the Advanced Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory announced they had detected gravitational waves, the front pages of newspapers and news programs around the world were covered with headlines, stories and pictures referring to the discovery. Many also included a potted history of events leading up to the discovery starting with Einstein's predictions from 1916. There was even a lengthy segment with Professor of astroparticle physics, Brian Greene, explaining the significance of the discovery on The Late Show, probably the most famous chat show in the world. This complete with a live mock-up of the laser experiment and an audience that clearly enjoyed every minute of the interview.
What’s more there is ample evidence that people actively engage with the many sciences they encounter in their lives, either through necessity or simply because they are interested. For example, in the early decades of the HIV epidemic the boundaries between scientists ‘insiders’ and lay ‘outsiders’ became blurred as gay activists successfully campaigned and reformulated the way that clinical research was conducted. In a similar way any examination of the many patient organised self-help or advocacy groups for those living with chronic conditions reveals people who have become lay experts by the consumption of scientific outputs mixed with lived experiences.

The many different natural sciences, including molecular biology, enjoy an extraordinarily privileged position in our society. Indeed we could say that we live in a culture saturated with the idea of science as a positive ideal and most people are rightly comfortable with this. But at a time when funding for science, technology, engineering and mathematics is ring-fenced, many of us working in the shrinking social sciences and humanities disciplines can only dream of having a cultural position like this. Perhaps if the new President of the Royal Society does manage ‘to get out more’ he might like to talk to a few of us. Instead of bemoaning the apparent lack of public understanding of science the Royal Society should be demonstrating a willingness to engage and learn from the many different publics.
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