



## COVID-19: an opportunity for science communication?

A year ago it would have been difficult to imagine scientists across the globe speaking directly to their nations, standing next to Prime Ministers and Presidents at the podium and answering questions for the world's press. Yet in a world where the response to coronavirus has changed our everyday lives beyond recognition, science has become part of our daily discourse. Science has a new relevance for people's lives when the R rate and mRNA vaccines are what determine when people can see their family or keep their business open.

This is a significant shift - and one that we wanted to learn from. How have scientists, politicians and journalists experienced communicating about science during a pandemic? What have been some of the challenges they have faced? And are there positive developments that we might want to see continue even after life moves back towards normality? These were some of the questions that we wanted to answer in collaboration with the Volkswagen Foundation and Stiftung Mercator in Germany. In three roundtables we discussed the role of the media, the experience of scientists and the views of politicians and policymakers. Our participants spanned German political leaders, policymakers, leading scientists, academics and journalists.

The Wellcome Trust's Germany office hosted a roundtable focused on science policy advice. As well as discussing some of the challenges of good science communication and policy advice that scientists, policymakers and journalists have experienced in recent months, we wanted to look to the future - focusing on the lessons we can learn from the experience of 2020 and recommendations for change.

Three key themes that emerged were **dealing with ambiguity**, **communication with diverse groups**, and **managing requests for advice**.

### Dealing with ambiguity

Ambiguity is an inherent feature of scientific research, but it can be difficult for policymakers and the public to make sense of. During a rapidly changing situation like the Covid-19 pandemic, scientific insights change quickly and frequently and can therefore be perceived as imprecise or unreliable. It can be challenging for policymakers to take decisions with significant political ramifications based on that advice, and we have seen frustrations from both politicians and the public when recommendations have had to be changed in light of newly emerging discoveries about the virus.

Several suggestions for addressing this issue were discussed at the roundtable. Both scientists and politicians felt they could benefit from a better understanding of each other's needs and communication styles. Regular communications training could be incorporated into scientific curricula, but our participants also emphasised the importance of 'on the ground' experience - providing low-risk opportunities to junior scientists to practice their science communication skills. Similarly, opportunities for politicians to improve their science literacy were discussed, for example through short workshops or exchange schemes with scientists.

### Communicating with diverse groups

Over the last few months we have seen some prominent examples of scientists successfully exploring new communication formats, such as podcasts and social media. However, much science communication still uses relatively traditional channels with decreasing reach, such as newspapers or television. This means that some groups who are likely to use other information channels, such as young people, may not be reached.

Our participants identified several promising programmes that are already tackling this issue. In Hamburg, for example, Wissen vom Fass ('Science on Tap') brings together leading scientists and local citizens in pubs around the city. Another option would be to directly involve interested and active young people in science communication as peer-to-peer communicators, to improve outreach to their age group.

## **Managing requests for advice**

Our participants acknowledged that the current situation has placed unusual demands on both politicians and scientists. For politicians, the breadth and variety of scientific policy advice available can be overwhelming. At the same time, scientists reported that they are flooded with requests from journalists to such a degree that it risks diverting their attention and resource away from critical research.

One solution that was suggested is a 'clustering' function. A clearing house could collate media requests so that scientists only received one inquiry on a subject, rather than being approached by dozens of media outlets individually. By collating inquiries in this way, the clearing house could also over time develop a catalogue of requests that have been answered and immediately send journalists the information they need.

## **What next?**

We thank everyone who participated in our roundtables for a stimulating and open discussion and look forward to taking the conversation further. We also want to make sure that we can raise these important issues with a wider audience. With this in mind the Wellcome Trust, Stiftung Mercator and the Volkswagen Foundation have co-authored an op-ed in the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, sharing the main themes and conclusions from the three roundtables.

In our view the Covid-19 pandemic is an opportunity to analyse the relationship between science, policy and society and consider how it might better function in future. This is a chance to be better prepared for the next pandemic.