

COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH – GETTING THE RIGHT MESSAGE TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Telmo Carvalho

Executive-Director, EurOcean – The European Centre for Information on Marine Sciences and Technology, Av D Carlos I 126 2º, 1249-074 Lisboa, Portugal
E-mail: telmo.carvalho@fct.mctes.pt

In a global context of knowledge democratization as a response to natural and social changes, more than ever scientific knowledge is fundamental for a factual social and political decision process. In this context, the science communication process gains a relevance that needs to be properly and transparently addressed.

We can define science communication (e.g. science exhibitions, science journalism, and science media production) as processes aiming to convey science results/findings to non-scientists. It is sometimes done by professional scientists but has evolved into a professional field in its own right. One of the problems of communicating science is to effectively disseminate the information that we want to talk about, i.e. getting the right message to the right people. In order to be successful in this difficult task, it is important to define dissemination, to well frame the information to disseminate and to identify the target audience of the message we want to disseminate. All these components make part of a good dissemination plan.

We understand dissemination as the act of dispersing or diffusing something (e.g. diffusion of knowledge), making available appropriate information to a target audience. It is also important to define information: knowledge obtained from analytical processes of sets of data and descriptors in a manner suitable for dissemination and communication. There are different types of dissemination depending on the target audience we want to address: Dissemination for Awareness, Dissemination for Understanding, Dissemination for Involvement, Dissemination for Action and/or Dissemination for Support. Among these, the most common dissemination types are:

- **Dissemination for Awareness:** intended for target audiences that do not require a detailed knowledge on the message, but to whom it is helpful to be aware of the message;
- **Dissemination for Understanding:** intended for groups/audiences that can benefit from the message, and thus need a deeper understanding of the message;
- **Dissemination for Action:** intended for groups that are in a position to 'influence' or 'bring about change' of practice resulting from the effective use of the disseminated information.

The type of dissemination to use is intrinsically connected with the profile of the audiences we want to reach and the objectives of the message/information towards that audience. Passing a scientific message to the public at large raises different concerns than to policy or decision-makers. For the general public, the element of surprise is the most successful component to make people interested, aware and supportive of the Oceans and of the need of preserving them. Images or/and movies of habitats and inhabitants of the hydrosphere (made possible in recent years by marine technology developments, like ROVs and high resolution underwater cameras) or even live specimens, cause in the public at large a fascination that other fields of science find difficult to match. This is easily confirmed when analyzing the number of visitors to Aquariums/Oceanariums in comparison with other types of science museums.

For policy and/or decision-makers, which have a more obvious need to 'understand in order to better decide', the key components are: 1) solid basic research/facts and 2) a good "translator" of scientific data (that is not immediately usable) to information that can be used in a planning and decision process. In this case materials/tools such as statistical analysis or repositories of information (data/infobases) are often very effective.

References

Sally Harmsworth and S. Turpin. 2000. Creating an effective dissemination strategy - An expanded interactive workbook for educational development projects. TQEF National Co-ordination Team.