

Dr. Maria Jepsen

Research and innovation are being promoted as the providing the solution to many of the main challenges faced by the world, bringing anticipated benefits, increased competitiveness, prosperity and better jobs. European policy-makers stress the Europe 2020 strategy and their commitment to research and innovation as the future for European development. This view has been widely promoted by various economic as well as societal actors (although increases in actual public research expenditures barely reflect this). However, the acceptance of the economic benefits of research does not go hand in hand with the acceptance of research as being solely beneficial for society in general. A RTD Info article suggests “People are not confident that the ‘sound science’ approach – a scientific assessment of risks and benefits with decisions made solely by the experts – is necessarily a guarantee of the best choice for society”. While European publics are not questioning the scientific information as much as they are actually questioning the institutions generating it (a lost confidence in business, government and the academe), they tend to perceive research to be good when it solves problems and is relevant to people’s lives – when research is useful to society, and not just in an economic sense. Too often though, researchers are perceived to be addressing issues that the public may not necessarily consider as beneficial to society. In the face of this paradox of perceiving science as the solution but doubting in the manner that the funds are being spent; rethinking the interaction between the science community and societal actors becomes a key issue.

Researchers are reacting to public concerns about the direction and potential outcomes of their work (eg, fears about biotechnology, medical research, food safety and nanotechnology) by increasing their efforts to communicate to non-specialists. While this is a necessary practice, such communication has often had limited success, and has, in some cases, even exacerbated public risk perception of research-based developments. Science communicators have been concentrating on finding ways for the public to ‘accept’ the research agenda, without sufficiently fostering a meaningful exchange. Other actors, with non-scientific perspectives, may not have the same priorities and value systems as researchers, so merely communicating better what science is doing might not be sufficient and could even be antagonising. A way forward is to create forums for interaction between the various actors in order to exchange and dialogue on societal relevance of research agendas, allowing for both communities to benefit from being challenged on the research questions they raise.

A key issue that arises within the complex interaction between science and societal actors is “who is the expert?”. While this question can be clearly answered at the extremes, there remains a grey-zone and overlap that should be exploited in a fruitful manner for societal actors as well as scientists. This requires a mutual respect and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of all actors. Creating a research system that can enable this interaction requires stable institutions, engaged and empowered actors.

Trade unions in certain EU member states have a long standing tradition of engaging with the science community with both positive and negative outcomes. It does however remain fragile in many countries.

In the light of scarce public resources and well as the continued political emphasis on science as being able to provide an answer to societal challenges, the importance of establishing and maintaining fruitful dialogue between the scientific community and societal actors will only grow. It might however be the right time to rethink how this interaction is brought about and what the resources to sustain this dialogue might be.