

SCIENCE DISSEMINATION AS A POTENTIAL FORM OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

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Abstract: This study is about science dissemination in its possible posture as a very specific Public Relations activity. We draw a brief historical perspective about the evolution of science from an isolated activity developed within small communities during the past historical times to the present. The study underlines the condition of science in modern times and especially its very pregnant visibility at the public sphere. The reasons and the causes for this situation are also described and discussed. The second part of the study is focused on the possibilities of science dissemination to become and to sustain a very particular type of PR activity for those agents who disseminate science to the level of the masses and on the public sphere in general. Some specific PR activities which are or could be involved in the activity of disseminating science are been also analyzed in this context. In the end the study, the specific condition of science in the age of mass communication is highlighted. This condition involves the concept of adaptability for any specific human activity to the demands of historical times in particular terms and conditions, and the fact that the present condition of science at the level of public sphere could be something temporary is stressed out.

Keywords: science, science dissemination, public relation, public sphere.

1. The Present Status of Science within the Public Sphere

This article is about promoting science but also about the public image and status of those agents who can do this. Today, the task of analyzing the impact of science to the general public is more stringent than ever because now science not only that has already a deep impact upon the daily life of the masses but it is also available to them, in its theoretical structure, through a public sphere of communication. And this type of availability must be understood and analyzed by the researchers of the mass communication phenomena in order to get a real picture of the whole process. This task should be implemented even if science is, by some sort of intuition, something which, due to its condition, solidly isolated to relatively small communities and, apparently, it does not need any promotion and any knowledge of its existence to the level of the general public and the public sphere. This is true due to the simple fact that now science is very present, in a form or in another, at the level of public sphere. In our time, science, and its general evolution, beyond a first look, has become something more complicated than a primary, rough and traditional perspective upon it can disclose. In this historical moment the old and well established perception about science and about the peoples which are making science after all is no longer sustainable (Ortega Y Gasset: 1994). Now science is something available for the general public but not in the sense that the scientific knowledge is accessible to the masses. The form of accessibility that we are talking about must be understood in the

sense that a large part of the scientific process can now be delivered to the general public either by communicating the results either by simply updating the public about the main fields of research. In this perspective, which here is only briefly described, we ask: how could be interpreted the general process by which science had become available to the public sphere in terms of a science of communication in general and in terms of public relations in particular? This general question implies others questions such are: 1. Who is communicating science to the masses? 2. Which are the general reasons because of why science has now a very important public visibility? This last question is also about the reasons for which some institutions have decide to promote their scientific activity within a general process of mass communication.

1.1. The Emergence of Science in Front of the General Public.

Our brief analysis will begin here by underlying the fact that the number of studies in this direction, at least as we know, are either very limited either deeply submerged in the general Public Relations Theory. By the contrary with this situation we consider that the issue of disseminating the results of scientific research to the general public should be considered as a serious subject not only for the PR theories but also for some perspectives from sciences such are sociology or psychology. Regarding this issue the debate should go on, in order to collect some strong evidences, to the level of specific methods of research from different social sciences such are sociology, social psychology or sciences of communications in general.

In order to see in which manner the activity of disseminating science to the general public could be seen as a potential form of Public Relation activity we want to start with those two questions from above. The first one is about understanding the process by which science has become in our historical time a public matter and a public topic within the general reality of mass communication. Without entering here in too many details we can disclose the anatomy of this historical process by underlying its two major coordinates. On the one hand, in the 20th century science has surfaced to the public sphere not by some sort of miracle but by its tremendous advance and by its almost incredible positive effects upon the daily life of the masses from the Western world. This was the main reason for which science has indeed become something known to the general public. Its beneficial effects, in terms of daily comfort for large masse of peoples, made from science something which could not be ignored any longer by the general public. If in the past science was something encapsulated within small communities, almost isolated within a specific medieval mentality and tradition about science and knowledge in general, starting with the beginning of 20th century science has become very visible to the general public because, regardless its slow and difficult progress, science has indeed generated spectacular effects which become accessible, through technological and practical applications, to the general public. Of course, this line of evolution was not so smooth has may appear at a first look but its general development can be indeed reduced to this general understanding.

On the other hand, another major reason for which science has surfaced to the masses with such a force was the general development of public sphere in terms of mass communication. *Science itself was a major contributor to its own access to the general public by the tools which it created.* This situation, together with the general and deep transformation at the level of public mentality, has finally generated the actual status of science within the public sphere in general and within the level of mass communication processes in particular.

Of course, it could be hard to deny the fact that the above described situation represents only a brief description of the general evolution of science within the public sphere in general but, regardless this possible observation, the main line of argument is valid. Starting with the status of science in modernity regarding its links with the general public let us see now which its situation in the present is and which are in the present the tools by which science is brought in the front of the general public.

1.2. Tools and Instruments of the Science Dissemination Process within the Public Sphere

Regarding the tools and the mechanisms by which now science is brought in front of the general public we can make the observation that these instruments and mechanisms of dissemination are in the present much more diversified and in many ways much more effective than they were in the near past, at the beginning of modern era and at the beginning of mass communication processes. In the present science is brought in front of the general public not only by traditional tools of the media but also by some specialized mechanisms designed almost only to do this task. The concept of "public" was defined, in a form or in another, since de 19th century and, accordingly to this conceptual development, we must admit that in all situations, more or less, science dissemination process has a form of public regardless its virtual indetermination (Alan Irwin: 1994).

Returning to our line of argument we can observe the fact that now, almost any major university or research center has its own newsletters and its own briefings about the latest evolutions or about the latest themes upon which they are doing scientific research. These instruments have a tremendous impact upon the specialized public which, of course, is very interested about the latest evolutions from its own field of scientific interest. But, and we must notice and underline this fact, these instruments are accessible not only to that very specialized public. *They are available to the general public too.* This means that the process of dissemination has evolved in an indeed effective way because the general public, by those kinds of newsletters for example, has the opportunity to find the latest scientific results not after they will be eventually published in the general or specialized media but from the original source which originally disseminate them. There is indeed in the present a global community of science dissemination, a community which is not encapsulated but by the contrary is available to the general public relatively easy. And, of course, all this situation represents not only a way through which the scientific community had discover an effective mode to stay in touch and to collaborate but it represents in the same time a

mode which is making possible the process of science dissemination throughout the public sphere in general.

More than it was said until here about the shape of science dissemination in the present days we can add the fact that in the present many of the major universities have their own research centers departments with substructures designed exclusively to either to disseminate science to a specialized public from around the world either to maintain the contact with the general public at the level of global communication sphere. These entities have their own specific tools which are used in order to achieve the task for which there were been created. Even more, in the present, there are all sorts of foundations or associations which, if they are not specifically designed for disseminating science they had anyway, within their declared general purposes, the task of doing this. Even the processes which are involved in grants or within different fellowships programs, which are developed by these foundations have, at least indirectly, the task of science dissemination to the general public, because in many cases these fellowships are awarded not only to university scholars but to independent researchers too. And by doing this those foundations have a major role in disseminating science in the present.

2. Science as a Potential Form of Public Relations Activity. Conditions and Perspectives.

Of course, it could be said more about the tools by which science is now disseminated to the general public and to the public sphere through the processes of globalization and mass communication. Anyway, regardless the proliferation of instruments and tools, the process of disseminating science is in itself a form of globalization. Our question, starting from these considerations, can be formulated in these terms: *could science, and especially its process of dissemination, which is so powerful in our historical time, be considered as a form, real or potential, of public relations activity? And if the answer is "yes" than which would be the consequences and the effects in general of such virtual reality?*

In order to obtain an answer to the above questions we will avoid entering in too many details or into some specific concepts from PR theories. This is not necessary because disseminating science, in its virtual posture of public relation activity, is so specific and so particular that it could hardly be reduced to some ordinary concepts from PR theories. Still, something it could be said about this virtual position for science if it is to consider that indeed some aspects from dissemination process could be seen as some sort of PR activity. But which would be these aspects?

We will try to answer in a brief manner to those questions by underlying the elements from within science dissemination process which could be indeed seen as forms of promoting not only science but the *image of science* and the *image of those institutions*, in front of the general public and within the public sphere, and which could be used beyond the general task of sustaining only a specific form of human endeavor.

2.1. The Formal Approach of Science Dissemination Process from a Public Relations Perspective.

The issue of science dissemination and its possible relations with some conceptual elements from within PR theories can be, in a first instance, analyzed through the formal set of elements which define the dissemination process in general. It is easy to observe that almost any type of instrument through which science is promoted in the present to the general public is also used within PR set of techniques. From media campaigns to the latest tools from IT the process of disseminating science has indeed become something which can be done in an easy and effective way. It would be almost completely useless to add here the fact that the tool known as "newsletter" it is in the present used on a very large scale not only by scientific research centers from around the world but also by universities, foundations and almost any type of institution which is interested, in different possible forms, in sustaining and promoting science in general. In the present there are studies about the process of disseminating science by and to different forms of public and we consider that that in a short period of time this area will become an independent field of academic research within the general conceptual frame of PR theories. In any case the process of science dissemination always is using an open type access tools even if in some cases you have to pay for the services (Enrique Canessa and Marco Zennaro, Eds.: 2008).

2.2. Science Dissemination and Mass Communication in the Age of Globalization.

Beside the first perspective, in which the main theme is the formal aspect involved in science dissemination process, it could be disclosed a second one which involves something more than the simple formal aspect. Here we can talk about something which represents more than only the technical part from the practical activity of dissemination. At this level we can detect the entire type of mentality from within global process of mass communication. Science dissemination through a great number of instruments and tools is in itself a testimony about the level of globalization in nowadays evolution of science. *And this situation in itself is a major contributor to the PR status of those institutions and agents which are involved in the process.* Because this constant traffic of information, of any kind, *is forcing those institutions to gain in time a solid and positive image on the market.* Briefly, in the huge ocean of dissemination process you have to gain your own position in order to become easy recognizable and respected. *At this second perspective what is starting to count is not only the set of techniques which are being used to disseminate but also the quality and the impact of the message transmitted by agents which are promoting science.* And this is true not only for the specialized public to which the message is transmitted but also for the general public.

In other terms, in the present is not important only to be at the market of science dissemination but also *to be in a manner which would individualize you in front*

of the public. And this goal is now achieved by the process of classification the instruments through which science is promoted and disseminated to the general public. Maybe the best example here would be the ISI phenomena from within the general and global process of communicating science. Here the things are very clear. An ISI status would give to you the possibility of having a much more impact upon a specialized category of public, but also to a general one, than you would have if your message is transmitted through a lower category of instruments, in terms of symbolic perception of your status within these classified instruments (ISI indexed journals or conferences for example). There are nothing more to explain or to discuss here: *the tools of disseminating science, due to their classification, have become symbols which can guarantee the quality of the message. So, the process of dissemination by such tools is having many parts in common with PR forms of activity but in the same time it keeps safe the integrity of the scientific approach even though anyone could consult those tools of disseminations.*

In addition to what had been said until here we must underline the diversity of science dissemination activities in the present. Beyond the specific and traditional process of communicating results within a specialized public area in the present there is a special category of scientific results which can be disseminated to the general public in such a manner that they could have a direct and beneficial effect upon the public. We think here about those scientific results from medical research. *Some of them could be with a great success disseminated to the public in such a manner that the public itself could directly participate to the improvement of general health condition of the population.*

2.3. Science Dissemination and the Issue of Obtaining a Positive Public Image.

Finally, we consider here another perspective of science dissemination, a one which is strongly linked with the second one. Beside, all those types of effects which can be obtained through disseminating science with modern tools and within the global mentality of mass communication it could be disclose that part which can *differentiate* scientific institutions in front of the general public. This means that the process of dissemination, by its forms of quality, guarantee in the same time a positive image of those institutions in front of the general public. *But in addition to the second perspective we must see that this process of obtaining quality is not reduced only to the present and to a good use of modern tools in dissemination process.* In many cases the very good and positive image of those institutions which are promoting science *is obtained in a dual manner.* On the one hand we have the modern mentality of dissemination by globalization and by the mentality of mass communication in the public sphere and, on the other hand, we have the *tradition of those institutions together with the personalities which are teaching or doing scientific research within them.* These elements, the tradition, the personalities and the modern tools of dissemination are, in a combined way, responsible for the status and for the prestige of

those institutions in front of general public. And through these combined elements, the science dissemination process in itself had become something which is very similar to techniques from PR but without losing the essence and the truth of scientific research or scientific results of the researching process.

3. Conclusions

In the end we want to make here a last observation. Maybe that this stage in the evolution of humanity and of the science in general is just something temporary and maybe in the future science will go back to a status of isolation and reclusion. Maybe the access of the masses to science is only an illusion of contemporary era and maybe that all this so called process of dissemination is just a temporary, debatable and useless trend. We do not know which the truth is but a fact is yet to be seriously considered: *it seems that the masses do not need science and the masses do not have access to science in the way in which, in its origins, sciences was created* (Ortega Y Gasset: 1994). Maybe the masses just have some sort of luck in these historical times because the general public has indeed access to the tremendous set of conceptual constructions which science has brought to them. But these benefits, even if now they are belonging to the masses, were not been created or obtained by the masses.

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