

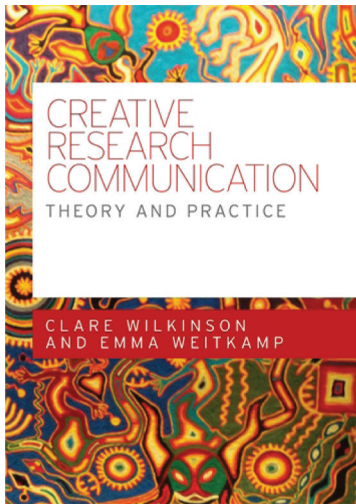


Book review

Creative Research Communication: Theory and practice, by Clare Wilkinson and Emma Weitkamp

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016, 304pp.,
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Reviewed by Henk A.J. Mulder*



Researchers are more and more inclined to engage in public engagement. According to a 2015 survey (Wellcome Trust *et al.*, 2015), most UK researchers agree that they have the moral responsibility to engage with the public, and a growing number of researchers now see engagement as a two-way dialogue. Even so, the research found that giving a public lecture still seems to be the most popular form of public engagement among researchers. Add this to the finding that only just over a quarter of researchers received any training in public engagement over the past five years, and the time is right for a book to support them and to get them engaged in creative, novel ways of engaging with various publics.

The book is aimed at researchers interested in engaging with the public, and at practitioners and postgraduate students. Students in particular will benefit from in-depth descriptions of the theoretical underpinnings to various approaches in public engagement with research, as will professional 'science communicators' and scholars in public engagement.

The book is split into three sections.

The first starts with the context of science and research communication, and outlines what is meant by creativity. Next is a historical overview in which I, for one, learned that making public appearances to obtain crowdfunding was already common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Only later did science become more elitist, excluding 'the public'. This chapter discusses the historical choices in science museums in some depth as well. The final chapter of the first section describes how to distinguish the various publics to engage with – and how to see them as 'participant'

in some cases, rather than as audience members. In my view, the most fundamental lesson from this is to have genuine respect for the various 'engagement partners'.

The second section describes a number of current engagement practices. It deals with both face-to-face and online approaches, and includes chapters on art, digital and social media. This section also discusses communication with the political spectrum and citizen science in its broadest sense, including crowdfunding and examples of how research can support communities to tackle societal issues. In addition to what a single researcher can do, this section deals with engagement practices that should be shaped at the level of the research project or research group; for example, as a scientist, developing an app is not something you would try to do on your own.

The chapters on practices are illustrated with numerous examples and interviews with practitioners from all over the world, which I found to be a strong element in the book. There are some surprisingly creative examples. For example, I would never have thought of Second Life as a venue to engage with research. Another strong point is the nuanced discussion of the limitations and disadvantages of certain methods. A weaker aspect is that the reader often has to go through a lot of theory and literature overview before the factors influencing the choice for or against a specific method are discussed. This limits the efficient use of the book by researchers who want to engage but do not know how to start. It would have been helpful to have information about required skills, costs and efforts in relation to outcomes and benefits early in each chapter or in a separate decision tree graph.

The final section consists of chapters on impact, ethics and dissemination. The impact chapter offers a good overview of motives and methods for evaluating research communication. It links to many very helpful tools, although it does not discuss indicators for rewarding research groups or researchers for public engagement. The chapter on ethics deals both with ethics in participatory research and ethics in science communication and engagement, which is thoughtful given the blurred line between them. When I read the title of the last chapter, 'Dissemination', I asked myself why that would belong in this book: is that not a deficit-model word? However, here the authors call on practitioners to share their experiences, despite the fact that 'publishing' is usually not in their job description. Given the importance of mutual learning, the authors describe various routes to make sure we do not reinvent the wheel, and can modify and add to each other's approaches.

The authors have done a great job in producing a book that differs from the usual edited text on science communication; written by just two authors it is more consistent, with better links between chapters. They describe both conventional research communication and novel, creative forms.

In general, the chapters do take communication to be a two-way street, although the chapter on social media rather surprisingly starts with the traditional media and focuses most on communication *to* – instead of *with* – various audiences.

The chapters are both descriptive and instructive, although the ratio differs between them. All chapters have ample references to additional tools, literature and resources. However, while the description of theory and literature is of specific use to students and scholars in science communication, the book is not a textbook – which would require learning objectives to be specified.

According to the Wellcome Trust *et al.* (2015) survey, one of the factors that most limits researchers in engaging with the public is time. This is one of the issues that this book obviously cannot solve. However, time may also be one of the limiting factors for researchers in using the book to its fullest potential. Therefore, I do hope the authors

will be allowed some time and copyright permission to transfer their book into an online resource, with added graphics, video and other creative formats.

Notes on the contributor

Henk Mulder is Lecturer in Science Communication and Chair of the Master's Programme Committee at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. He also teaches Science and Technology Studies and coordinates the Science Shop at the Faculty of Science and Engineering. He has degrees in Chemistry and Energy and Environmental Sciences.

References

Wellcome Trust et al. (2015) *Factors Affecting Public Engagement by Researchers: Reflections on the changing landscape of public engagement by researchers in the UK*. Online. <https://wellcome.ac.uk/sites/default/files/wtp060034.pdf> (accessed 13 February 2017).