

Parallel session: Interactions between science communication and science policies

Representations of science in the knowledge society

Brian Trench, Dublin City University, Dublin 9, Ireland; brian.trench@dcu.ie

Abstract: The emergence of “the knowledge society” as a guiding concept for public policy has reshaped the context and content of public communication of science and technology. The widespread adoption of “the knowledge society” as a social goal may at the same time enhance the social and political standing of science and give preference to particular, perhaps restrictive, conceptions of its value and roles.

Keywords: knowledge society; public policy; functions of science

Economists and sociologists have offered plausible accounts of the ever-greater emphasis on mental work, of the increasingly specialized skills required to maintain economic processes, and of the increasing social contextualization of the production of knowledge (Nowotny et al, 2001). Whether this merits the redefinition of advanced economies is unclear.

Two elements of the current “knowledge society” discussion should advise us to be cautious in using this phrase:

1. it is less than a decade since the argument about the primary role of knowledge in individual enterprises was translated into one about the character of the economy; this elision from enterprise to economy has potentially dangerous consequences.
2. it is also only a decade since the concept of “the information society” was commanding the attention now accorded to “the knowledge society”.

The rapid turnover and unsteady usage of key phrases reveal both a desire in policy circles to find the “mobilizing metaphors” that can help orchestrate change, but also uncertainty about what is really going on. We should be careful about using “the knowledge society” as if it referred to a given, proven entity. We may be talking about a proposition, a metaphor, an aspiration.

Ireland represents a striking case of a country that promotes research and development with the aim of building a competitive science base. Many countries see Ireland as a model of a rapidly developing knowledge-based economy.

In four years since its establishment, Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) has allocated over €600 million to research and attracted both Irish émigrés and non-nationals to establish significant research teams in Ireland. Universities have received a further €600 million over the same period to support research centres.

There is a consistent pattern to policy documents, ministers’ speeches and other formal statement of the arguments supporting this new departure: scientific research, commercial competitiveness and innovation capacity are mutually dependent; in combination, they deliver economic development. Education and training and advanced telecommunications underpin these relationships.

SFI director-general William Harris, for example, has argued that universities need to evolve “a competitive system of intellectual development [which] is essential to boosting the credibility of Irish research in the world community”. He derives his definition of a knowledge society from the observation of companies’ competitive success.

The dominant discourse is clearly recognisable and is echoed in the editorial columns of the generally independent-minded newspaper, *The Irish Times*: “The government ... wants to foster a knowledge-based economy, one that makes the new discoveries and develops the innovative products as a way to protect our economic future.”

In this dominant discourse the public is an object, rather than a subject, of social processes: policy initiatives seek to persuade parents and students of the benefits of studying science.

There is evidence of an awareness in policy circles of a possible different approach: the Minister for Enterprise Trade and Employment last year spoke about a “civic science”, that is, “a science engaged with and invited into the national dialogue”, “a science responsive to the public and worthy of the public trust”. But this challenge remains unanswered.

Elsewhere in Europe, the dominant policy discourse of the knowledge society takes similar forms. Patricia Hewitt, the UK Trade and Industry Secretary, declared: “We still need to get science out of the labs, into our companies and on to the balance sheet”.

Among the new EU member states Estonia aims to develop “a new knowledge-based economy, based on investment in research and development to generate science-rich technology or products”; it persuaded the European Union to allow it use new EU development funds to support research.

Finland declared as long ago as 1996: “Finland is *a knowledge-based society*”. A recent report on that country stated baldly: “In the knowledge society welfare and competitiveness are obtained through innovation. Education and R&D act as catalysts for innovations”.

It has been observed that in “the knowledge society”, “technology and instrumental technical knowledge becomes not merely the means but ... the key measure and goal of societal development” (Preston, 2003). Educationalist Alison Wolf has questioned the assumed relations between educational investment and economic growth that underlies “knowledge society” strategies (Wolf, 2002).

From the point of view of science communication, we also have reason to be concerned about what the push for a “knowledge society” is doing to science and to prospects for its mainstreaming in culture. At one level, “the knowledge society” appears as an answer to the prayers of the science communication community; science may be higher now on political agendas than it has ever been.

But the push for “the knowledge society” presents knowledge and science in reductionist and instrumentalist frames: science is supported for its capacity to deliver improved products, processes and skills; the privileged attention given to techno-scientific knowledge marginalises other forms of creative, critical and analytical knowledge. “The knowledge society” may be promoting a bureaucratic and technocratic “encapsulation” of science.

If science communication has to do with talking about science in a democratic framework of broad social access, balanced dialogue, respect for diversity, and cultural completeness, “the knowledge society” is as much a threat as an opportunity.

References:

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