Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 1273 (2002)[1]

Scientific communication

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Many scientific topics are increasingly becoming the focus of public and political attention. Politicians are having to take decisions on scientific matters which have far-reaching implications for citizens' everyday lives. Citizens are asking themselves questions, and they are also questioning the politicians who represent them. Politicians, who are at the interface between the public and the scientific world, must understand science in order to ensure that their decisions are as informed as possible and that they can subsequently explain their choices to the public.

2. Scientific communication has become a prime strategic tool because it provides information for both the public and the policy makers on developments in such sensitive areas as nuclear energy, pollution, bioethics and genetic engineering, the new information and communication technologies and the exploration of space. It can, however, be exploited either to promote a laboratory or to attract funding.

3. The Parliamentary Assembly has already addressed, in its Resolution 1083 (1996), the question of parliamentary assessment of scientific and technological choices.

4. If the public are inadequately, wrongly or incompletely informed, this may have adverse effects on science policy decisions, as a body of opinion that has (rightly or wrongly) been formed on a particular subject will influence policy makers, who are obliged to take account of public opinion or face losing out in the elections. Journalists have the right to question information given by scientists or companies and make independent investigations.

5. Likewise, the public has a right to complete and accurate information. It needs therefore to be constantly informed of scientific and technological developments. This helps to ensure a reasonable position on any research and development.

6. Although conferences, exhibitions and other events organised directly or indirectly by the scientific community have a part to play, the bulk of scientific information reaches the public through the media.

7. Scientific journalists generally have sound scientific or technical training. This is not true of non-specialist journalists who deal occasionally with scientific matters. Any inaccuracy or misinterpretation of the information provided (resulting from the journalist's inability to explain the subject or quite simply from a quest for sensationalism) will in all likelihood mislead, excite or needlessly alarm the public.

8. The scientific community and the media still fail to understand each other. Some scientists have a tendency to use journalists as mere intermediaries in order to publicise their work, whereas journalists criticise scientists for not communicating in language that people can understand.

1. Assembly debate on 25 January 2002 (8th Sitting) (see Doc. 9300, report of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education, rapporteur: Mr Birraux). Text adopted by the Assembly on 25 January 2002 (8th Sitting).

9. The Assembly invites the governments of member states, scientists and the media to promote appropriate means of communicating scientific information at both national and European level, in order to ensure openness, transparency and balance, in particular:

a. by prompting universities and scientific societies to develop communication training for scientists, on the model of the United Kingdom, where the British Psychological Society and the Committee on the Public Understanding of Science are actively involved in such work;

b. by fostering the development and even the institutionalisation of regular contacts between science journalists and scientific circles, so that the two communities can get to know each other better;

c. by encouraging the training of journalists in scientific communication, in particular by the setting up in all journalism schools of special sections to train science journalists;

d. by supporting the setting up and the work of national associations of science journalists and their involvement in the work of the European Union of Science Journalists' Associations;

e. by providing public support for the specialist science press and encouraging mergers between publications in order to improve their quality, extend their readerships and enhance their reputation;

f. by developing a permanent technical platform on the Internet, on the model of the American "Public Library of Science", hosting scientific archives and fora for exchanges on various research topics;

g. by encouraging representatives of the scientific community and the media to organise jointly events likely to be of interest to the general public in certain branches of science, such as laboratory open days, science weeks and thematic evenings on television.