Sustainable Infrastructures for Life Science Communication

Workshop and Discussion

January 10th, 2014
Sustainable Infrastructures for Life Science Communication

What did we learn on Day 1?
Key questions we asked

- What do we mean by “sustainable infrastructures”?
- Why are they important?
- What do they produce?
- What do they look like?
- What does research tell us about them?

- For all these questions: What do we know? What do we not know?
In practice...

Many passionate individual life scientists engage in communication their research.

• Mostly without overt institutional support
• Usually with institutional benign neglect, seldom active hostility
• General lack of success scaling up one-off models of communication

• “Altruism is not a sustainable model”
Research told us...

- Extrinsic rewards do not seem to contribute to a scientist’s likelihood of engaging in PCST
- Scientists are conservative in beliefs about publication, scientific process, institutional forces
- Though many individuals trying new media
And research told us...

- Scientists hold to “provide information” model, but social science shows that as important are:
  - Audience [segmentation]
  - Frames
  - Trust
  - Emotions

- *But not:* How to change scientists’ models
In practice...

Many organizations have robust approaches to life sciences communication

• May conflate marketing with communicating
• Often geared *institutionally* toward legacy media rather than new media
• *Organizations with clearly defined goals tend to have better defined communication protocols*
In practice...

Policies may (knowingly or unknowingly) hamper communication

- “Gag orders” in guise of coordinating communication create mistrust and missed opportunities
- “Handling” communicators may be well intended but poorly received
- *Institutional policies should not create “better safe than sorry” attitude toward communications*
Research told us...

• Maybe new media are creating changes in institutional incentives
• New initiatives in training scientists for communication widespread
• Training efforts should be focused on core communication competencies

• But not: What actions can sustainably change institutional infrastructures?
In practice...

No community of practice exists in life sciences communication

• Lacks clear vision of the communication value proposition
• Continues to focus on traditional academic communication as the gold standard
• Unconnected to communications research literature
• *Cultural transformation is difficult*
In practice...

Few examples of communication impact or metrics of success were shared

- Metrics tended toward process rather than impact of exposure
- Partly this is because the community has not articulated what success would look like
- Metrics not widely shared in a community of practice

- Evaluation is critical to sustainability
Remaining questions (what we don’t know):

- How do we get scientists to understand media/publics?
- How do these ideas get implemented in academe, industry, NGOs, government?
- Ultimately: What’s the “value proposition” for individuals and institutions?