



**Paper for PCST session Dialogical Science Communication and Publics in the Making**  
**Public Engagement through Science Dialogue**  
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Today, science is discussed mainly in mass media. It is unusual for the public and researchers to meet face to face, even though everyone is affected by and pays for research. Much effort is directed towards enhancing the quality and quantity of popular science. But there has to be a demand for knowledge. Therefore, it is as important to listen to people and to get them involved, as it is to provide information.

Science catches people's imagination when they perceive it as meaningful and relevant, and view it in its proper context. If so, people are very interested in discussing science – both according to our experiences and to the several attitudinal surveys VA has conducted in Sweden<sup>1</sup>.

### **New ideas for scientists**

Laypersons can give scientists new insights, and a better feel for how their work is perceived by the general public. By participating in public engagement activities researchers will also gain a better idea of what actually sparks people's interest, what concerns them and what they want to know. *Science's understanding of the public is just as important as the public's understanding of science.*

Many researchers would like more contact with society. Yet direct, mutual exchanges of ideas are rare. VA is convinced that a wider variety of democratic discussion forums are needed. This is why we arrange science cafés and work together with the British Council Stockholm office to spread the café concept around Sweden.

A science café is an open forum where the public meets scientists to discuss topical issues over a cup of coffee, a beer or a glass of wine. Anyone with an interest in the topic is welcome to take part. The aim is for both scientists and laymen to gain new knowledge and insights, the participants being the ones directing the dialogue.

The starting point of a science café should be what actually interests people or truly relates to people's lives, such as *Why do we fall in love?* or *May the nano particles in my sunscreen be harmful?* The best conversation topics provoke a reaction in everyone. It can be research that is inherently fascinating or changes the way people think, as well as developments that have social impact or create ethical dilemmas. Any area of science can be covered, from medicine, biology and technology to social sciences, humanities and even the arts.

### **French origins**

Science Cafés first appeared around the same time in France and Britain in 1998. The concept was a variation of the Cafés Philosophiques which had been running for several years in France. Since then the initiative has spread. Now science cafés can be found in some 30 countries around the world. In some places there are also special cafés for children, young people and students. Some cafés are run by universities or by organisations such as ours, others are run on a voluntary basis by people just passionate about science.

Although the format varies, the overarching aim of a science café is to promote public engagement with science and to make it more accessible. The choice of venue is crucial. Discussions can be held in bars, pubs, restaurants, cafés, theatres or museums – the most important thing is that it is a relaxed environment. The point is to go where an audience already congregates naturally.

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<sup>1</sup> VA has run yearly attitudinal studies since 2002. The results are summarised in an article published in *Science & Public Affairs* 2007, see reference list.

The participating scientist is a key person. He or she must be a good communicator *and* listener, enthusiastic, able to make the subject engaging and be open to discussion. In the UK, it is usual to invite only one expert, while in Denmark and France, for example, there is often a panel consisting of scientists, journalists, philosophers and authors. A cultural dimension is sometimes also added.

It can be interesting to invite a panel of experts from different disciplines. In Sweden, we have tried different meeting models and numbers of participants, all with their pros and cons. With too many invited experts, the risk is however that the scientists talk too much to each other and that the audience become more observers than participants.

### **The science café format**

The discussion takes place in an informal setting and is free to attend. The café usually starts with a few words from the one or more scientists, who provide a short introduction to the topic, preferably using concrete examples and thought-provoking comments. Overhead slides and power point presentations should not be used but an object could be brought to show and pass around.

After the introduction, the moderator opens the floor to anyone who wants to make a comment or ask a question. The role of the moderator is also to explain the format, to invite the audience to participate from the start, as well as to stress that no question is stupid.

The discussion usually lasts for between an hour and an hour and a half. Ideally the researchers have prepared some questions for the audience to stimulate public reaction to their work. It can also be fruitful to encourage audience members to talk among themselves for a while. Another idea is to invite the audience itself to answer a particularly good question that arises. After the closing remarks, those who wish can continue the discussion around their tables and chat to the scientists on an even more informal basis.

To assist science café organisers, VA and BC have put together some tips for organisers as well as briefing notes for speakers and moderators. We have also developed a special website, [sciencecafe.se](http://sciencecafe.se), with useful information and a calendar where upcoming café events are posted.

### **Indicators needed**

Most researchers believe that public engagement is interesting, stimulating and gives new insights, according to VA studies. From our experiences scientists are generally very keen to participate in a science café, partly also because it does not involve too much commitment on their part in terms of time and preparation. Engagement with society at large is an important mission of researchers, but one that is unfortunately often regarded as a “third,” less prioritised mission instead of an integrated aspect of education and research.

In fact, researchers relatively seldom engage in outreach activities such as science cafés. A major reason is that public engagement rarely results in higher merits or additional funding – also confirmed by VA’s findings.

One way to change attitudes is to clearly emphasise the value of societal engagement when allocating resources. This can be accomplished by formalising the measurement of universities’ as well as individual efforts in this area. VA is convinced that clear indicators need to be defined in order for this to become a reality. We have therefore presented and analysed a number of initiatives and projects in different countries in a report that concludes with a set of possible indicators.

### **Conclusion**

VA’s studies as well as our experiences from arranging various kinds of meetings between researchers and the broader public clearly show that the science café format works well. We are convinced that more opportunities for scientists and citizens to meet and engage in genuine dialogues will benefit us all – both science and society.

### **Vetenskap & Allmänhet**

Vetenskap & Allmänhet, VA (Public & Science in English), is a Swedish non-profit association aimed at promoting openness and trust between the public and researchers. More specifically, VA aims to:

- promote contact and the exchange of ideas between the public and scientific researchers
- increase public knowledge of research methods and findings
- improve sensitivity and understanding among researchers about the public's questions and concerns about research
- build networks for encounters, interactions and exchanges of experience.

To achieve the goals, three main approaches are used:

*Dialogue* – we organise and encourage meetings in new and unconventional arenas where researchers and the public can hold dialogues based on what the public is interested in.

*Knowledge* – we conduct surveys and studies on how the public views research, how researchers view dialogue and what specific groups of society think about science.

*Experience* – we disseminate the survey results and experiences of various activities organised both by ourselves and others.

VA is based on the broad involvement of organisations, public authorities and institutions, labour confederations, companies, private associations, religious groups and private individuals from across Swedish society. More information can be found at [www.v-a.se](http://www.v-a.se)

## References

*How Researchers View Public and Science*, VA interview survey 2003: [http://www.v-a.se/downloads/varapport2003\\_4\\_eng.pdf](http://www.v-a.se/downloads/varapport2003_4_eng.pdf)

*Measuring societal engagement – proposed indicators for resource allocation and academic merit rating*, VA report 2007: [http://www.v-a.se/downloads/Engagementindicators\\_Feb2008.pdf](http://www.v-a.se/downloads/Engagementindicators_Feb2008.pdf)

*Swedes losing confidence in researchers*, Hermansson K., Crooks, E., article in Science & Public Affairs Dec 2007: [http://www.v-a.se/downloads/swedes\\_losing\\_confidence\\_in\\_researchers.pdf](http://www.v-a.se/downloads/swedes_losing_confidence_in_researchers.pdf)

*The Swedish science café website*: [www.sciencecafe.se](http://www.sciencecafe.se)

*Tips for science café moderators*: <http://www.sciencecafe.se/kitSiPub/bilagor/20070912234406.000000.pdf>

*Tips for science café organisers*: <http://www.sciencecafe.se/kitSiPub/bilagor/20070912234412.000000.pdf>

*Tips for scientists participating in a science café*: <http://www.sciencecafe.se/kitSiPub/bilagor/20070912234417.000000.pdf>