

Five minutes with Alice Roberts: “During my academic career I’ve encountered considerable opposition to engagement with the public”

by Blog Admin

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Alice Roberts, Birmingham University’s new Professor of Public Engagement takes five minutes to talk to the **LSE Impact blog team** about the public’s thirst for knowledge, how communicating research is not a frivolity and why she hopes her new appointment is a sign that it’s now acceptable to both an academic, and on television.



Congratulations on your recent appointment as Professor of Public Engagement at Birmingham University – what will the post involve?

I believe the fact that more and more universities are creating such posts underlines their commitment to the idea of ‘public engagement in science’. Although I think many scientists have always seen communicating or engaging with their wider communities as an important part of their work, it’s also been seen very much as a marginal activity until relatively recently. The Royal Society’s ‘Bodmer Report’, led by Professor Sir Walter Bodmer in 1985, highlighted the importance of science and technology to our economy, and recommended that science communication needed to be taken more seriously. This caught on, and eventually the Research Councils were asking for details about communication to be included in grant applications. The slightly paternalistic description of this endeavour as ‘public understanding of science’, working on a deficit model where the public were seen as needing to be educated, changed to ‘public engagement’, reflecting a reorientation towards dialogue – real *communication*.

Although there’s been increasing official recognition of the importance of public engagement in science, I think it’s taken a long time to filter through. And I’m not entirely sure we’re *there* yet. During my academic career I’ve encountered quite considerable opposition and obstacles to engaging with the public. Firstly, it is difficult to squeeze something else into an already busy job. But then there’s also – still, I think – a feeling amongst a few academics that communicating about your own research and your field more generally is a distraction, an irrelevance, a frivolity.

I’m really delighted to be joining the University of Birmingham in this new post. I think it sends a very strong message to academics in that university that public engagement is a highly valued activity. I hope to be able to support other academics in public engagement, but at the same time, I’m looking forward to some more traditional academic roles as well: teaching undergraduates and doing some research. I hope that my appointment means that it’s also acceptable to be an academic and on television! Academics can be very suspicious about broadcast media, but it can be an incredibly powerful means of opening up those channels of communication – reaching out to a much wider audience than you might think possible.

Academics have a traditional image of being stuck in an ivory tower. How do you see that changing, and, what do you think academics should be doing to change this?

So much research in this country is publicly funded, researchers have a moral obligation to enter into a public dialogue about that research. But more than that, there’s also a strong ethical consideration: so many of the challenges facing our society require scientific/technological solutions, and if we’re really to be a democracy, our entire population needs to be scientifically literate. That depends on formal education, certainly, but also on life-long learning. The best people to engage with the wider public about science are scientists themselves. They need to arm themselves with



the ability to communicate. The government, universities and university departments need to support their academics to get out there and engage with the public. New media are opening up new worlds of possibility: twitter and blogging can break scientists out of the ivory tower and put them right in the middle of the forum, the virtual town square. Academics can – and are – entering into conversation with all of us.



You've already had huge success with television series, in particular with the BBC production, Coast. What is it, do you think, that make the shows so successful?

I love Coast. It's been going for years now, but it was only ever envisaged as a single-series, a one-off celebration of Britain's maritime heritage. The ratings for the first series caught the BBC by surprise: around 4 million people tuned in for each episode, to see the history, archaeology, wildlife and science of the coast. The series producer, Steve Evanson, has a PhD in physics and he's always wanted to make science part of the mix, part of the culture of the series, rather than separating science out as a 'special case'. I think that's fantastic. Somehow, science became distracted from the rest of our culture during the 20th century (I refer you to CP Snow at this point) so anything which puts it back in is fine by me. Coast was also great because it didn't pull any punches when it came to science. We used technical words, but explained them. The presenters all had an expert background across a range of disciplines, and were engaged with the editorial of the programme – sometimes suggesting stories and contributors, collaborating on the script, and helping to communicate some quite complex concepts. And of course, we were really lucky to have top experts in their fields as contributors on the programme. That is essential – and that's why it's so important that universities don't disregard or denigrate television. As a medium, it can be such a beautiful, visual way of disseminating science to a very wide audience indeed.

Do you feel that your television series have tapped into a wider public desire for knowledge? How do you think we can encourage a thirst for knowledge among the general public?

I think that the enduring appeal and success of television documentaries shows that people really want this medium to inform and educate – as well as to entertain. I think the main lesson for television producers is that they should never underestimate that desire for knowledge, nor underestimate the intelligence of viewers. As a member of the public, I enjoy being *challenged* by documentaries.

You've said that you hope to combine your academic duties with more television work – what would you say to academics who might be wary of engaging with traditional and new media, including blogs and twitter? Secondly, when will you ever find time to sleep?!

I think blogs and twitter can both be very effective ways of reaching out to a wider group of people than might be possible through other, more traditional media. Blogging gives scientists the opportunity to publish news and views, and respond to other published research very quickly. I think Twitter is great for flagging up interesting articles or pieces of research as well as keeping track of science and politics. It's also good for witty repartee!

Some academics may be – quite rightly – wary of engaging with print or broadcast media. For a few academics, the only time they'll have come into contact with journalists and producers is when a scandalous story breaks, or a scientific rival is attacking them. But even those interactions with the media needn't be negative: after all, you're being given an opportunity to broadcast your own story, and present your own evidence. And I think that interaction with the media can also be a very positive thing, personally. I think scientists could be more proactive in contacting media about exciting ideas, projects and results. I enjoy the television work I do; I think presenting skills are transferable and make you a better teacher (and vice versa), and I love working in a creative team.

I'm juggling my television work with my new part-time academic post at Birmingham – and with being a mother of a very energetic toddler; I've always liked being busy, and I'm extremely lucky that I love my work – but I can only do it all because of my husband's fantastic support.

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