

# Leaving the comfort zone: Public engagement can help you think about your research from a fresh perspective.

**ISE** [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/10/24/leaving-the-comfort-zone-public-engagement/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/10/24/leaving-the-comfort-zone-public-engagement/)

10/24/2014

*When it comes to sharing your research, **Amelia Sharman** stresses that there is no 'one size fits all' model to follow. Researchers, topics, audiences and end goals are all different. But where researchers are interested, structures that encourage rather than inhibit public communication are desperately needed.*



Imagine this: you're standing on a box in a public place while hundreds of people pass by. There's a sign stuck to a pole in front of you which is asking a controversial question related to your research that a) you don't necessarily know 'the answer' to, and b) you're actually hoping the public will weigh in on and tell you what they think. Your job is to discuss pretty much any topic that the people passing by bring up in relation to your controversial question.

The stuff of nightmares? It's completely understandable that it's far out of most researchers' definitions of the 'comfort zone', particularly given that in most other public speaking scenarios researchers come across, such as departmental presentations or conferences, the emphasis is on accuracy and evidence, rather than opinion or conjecture. So why would I over the last few months have willingly done just this, not once, but twice, as part of the [Natural History Museum's late night series](#)?

The answer is two-fold. First, I think it's an important responsibility of scientists to engage beyond the ivory tower. Many of us have been fortunate enough to receive funding to carry out our research, and I think this comes with important 'strings attached' whereby we have a duty to make sure the knowledge we have gained is shared. This isn't just about the so-called [impact agenda](#) (although that's obviously pretty important too), but also about conveying a passion for learning and the important value of academic research to those who don't necessarily engage with it every day.



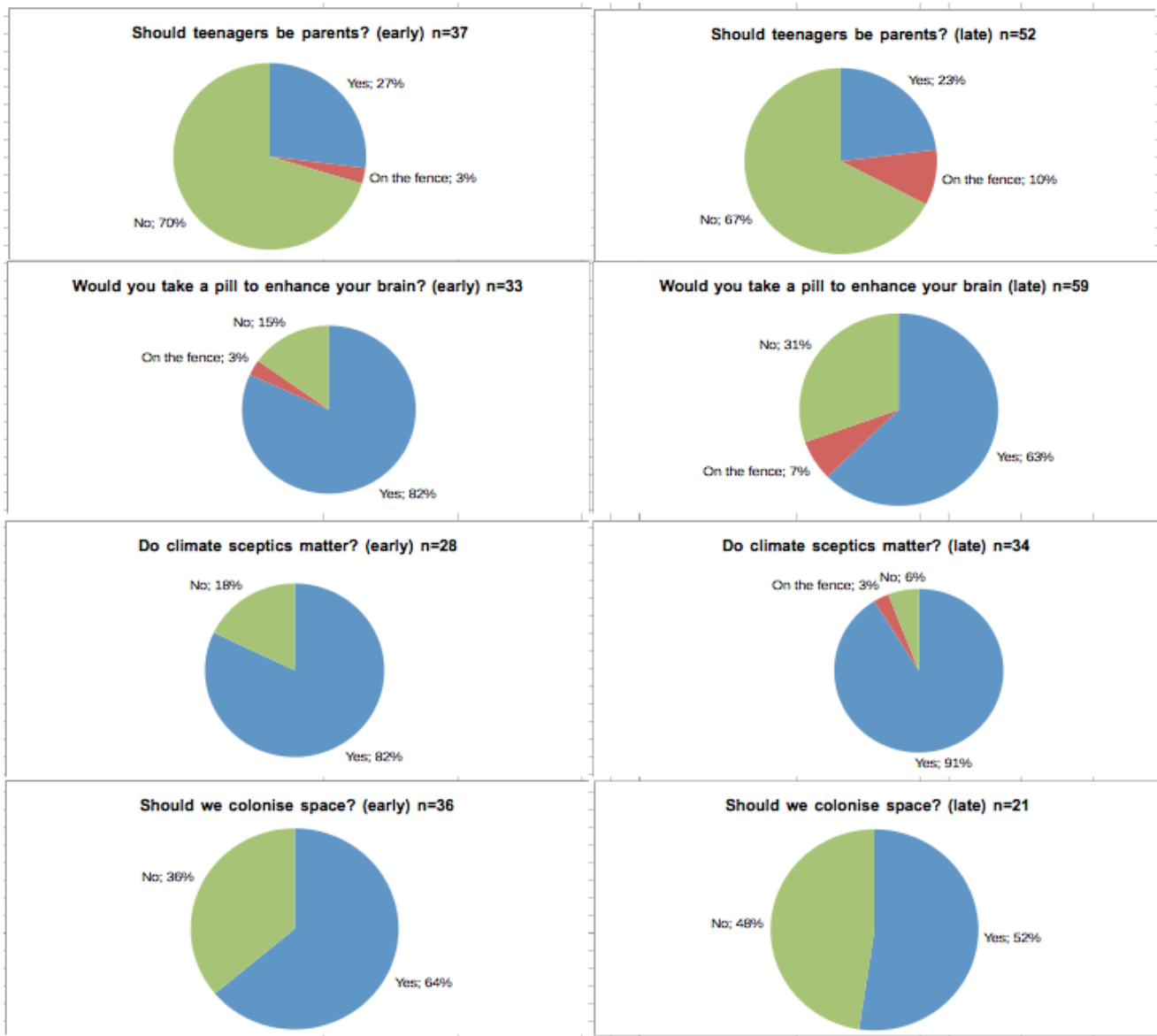
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Now, this doesn't mean I think it should be everyone's responsibility as different researchers have skills in different areas, but where researchers are interested, structures that encourage rather than inhibit public communication are desperately needed. I'm not alone in taking this point of view (see for example this [2011 editorial by David Dickson at SciDevNet](#)) even though in certain areas, such as my own research into climate change, it's definitely [not always easy](#).

Second, and perhaps more selfishly, public communication has so many transferable benefits to me as a researcher it just makes sense to do it. It requires you to think about your research in a clear and logical way, and if you can't explain your research in less than a minute to a non-specialist audience, it's probably not clear in your own mind yet—something that is particularly important to me as a final year PhD student! It improves your ability to speak in any context, including research presentations, as the underlying structure of question, reflection and answer is pretty similar. Also, if like me, you find [verbalising your ideas can help to clarify your own thoughts on the matter](#), public engagement can stimulate your thought processes in numerous different ways.

But, and perhaps most importantly, public engagement can help you to think about your research from a fresh perspective. Sometimes it can bring up the completely obvious which has escaped you when you're bogged down in the detail, and at other times it highlights a link to another issue that you hadn't even considered. What can help to highlight these new ideas are the different modes of communication that public engagement entails. At the Science Uncovered NHM Late, [Dr Jill Stuart](#) made the suggestion for us to also have our controversial question as a Yes/No vote. In practice, this was a brilliant idea, as it not only engaged those people who might not have participated in the discussion, but it also gave us a fascinating source of data.

The graphs below show the results of the Yes/No vote for each question, and for each session (each researcher spoke for half an hour, either between 6-8pm, and then again in the same order from 8-10pm). All sorts of things can be teased out of something like this and while they may not necessarily be able to form the basis of data used in actual research, they can help to inspire interesting questions or other avenues to discuss.



For example, people were more likely to be ‘on the fence’ (neither yes, nor no) later in the evening in response to [Dr Ofra Koffman](#)’s question ‘Should teenagers be parents?’. Is this the mollifying effect of a few drinks, or is the slightly larger sample size more reflective of broader public opinion? In response to [Imre Bard](#)’s question ‘Would you take a pill to enhance your brain?’ opinion dramatically shifted towards a negative response during the course of the evening, but in response to my research question, ‘Do climate sceptics matter?’ the opposite happened, with respondents more likely to agree in the later session. All kinds of explanations are possible, but perhaps it is due to an evening in the company of enthusiastic scientists, with respondents more able to conceptualise a potential negative impact on science from a climate sceptical discourse. And Dr Jill Stuart’s question, ‘Should we colonise space?’ was noteworthy for a complete lack of fence-sitters and the shift towards a near 50-50 public opinion for and against later in the evening. These results are fascinating, and this experience has already helped my research in practical terms. For example, the fact that the answers to my question are the starkest of the bunch has made me more attentive in my reading to issues of opinion polarisation and motivated reasoning.

There exists a [vast literature](#) focusing on different models of science communication, but I think an important take-away point is that there is no ‘one size fits all’ model to follow. Researchers, topics, audiences and end goals are all different, and I encourage LSE staff and students interested in greater public or stakeholder engagement to connect with the [Teaching and Learning Centre](#) to find out more about personal development training or future engagement opportunities. So find out what works for you and get out there and get involved!

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

## **About the Author**

**Amelia Sharman** is a PhD student at the [Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment](#) at the LSE. Her research is focused on the role of contested knowledge in scientific and political decision-making to do with climate change. Previously, Amelia was a Sustainability Specialist at the International Hydropower Association and a Senior Policy Advisor at the New Zealand Ministry of Economic Development.

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