

**Science Making Worlds Meet**  
*PCST April 2016, Istanbul, Turkey*  
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I was recently given the wonderful opportunity to attend the Public Communication of Science and Technology Conference in Istanbul, Turkey under the generous funding of the Spirit of Life Foundation Scholarship through the Division of Medical Sciences at Harvard Medical School.

My interest in understanding science communication (from my perspective, how can scientists drive communication/engagement to their advantage), stems from my involvement with Science in the News (SITN). SITN is a graduate student organization at Harvard committed to bridging the gap between scientists and the general public, and equipping the next generation of scientists with essential skill sets for their careers as well as keeping them engaged in an interdisciplinary world.

Science communication, both in theory and practice, can allow for people with a common goal to come together and bring countries together in union to shape global policies, as I witnessed at PCST 2016.

As expected, there was a slight cloud over the conference in light of the political climate. We saw that a good number of presenters were forced to cancel their travel plans, due to rapidly changing government or institutional regulations regarding travel to Turkey. While this initially cast a shadow over the proceedings, the organizers did a fantastic job ensuring the safety and ease of the attendees at the conference- making us all feel very welcome.

Istanbul is a city that is brimming with history and culture. From the European side to the Asian side to the many historical eras that this city connects, there was almost too much to be absorbed. Roaming around the city with a diverse group of new friends from the conference and connecting with them allowed me to soak in the experience with a renewed respect for other nations.

### **Representation at PCST**

In many ways, I was an outsider to the conference, both as a current scientist and also as an American. More than 50 different countries were represented, Rarely does this ever happen, so it was an eye-opening experience for me and a great way to really quickly pull me out of any comfort zone I may have started with. Based on the stats, less than 5% of the attendees were currently practicing “hard-science”. Most of the participants were actually practitioners of science communication, for example public relations offices at universities and public policy officials, or social science researchers who study the nuances of science communication and public engagement activities across the globe. The diverse range of topics was rather overwhelming to me, in a field I expected to be rather small.

Additionally, the other peculiar part was that I felt almost that scientists were excluded from conversations revolving around public dissemination and engagement of science on the basis that they were “disinterested” or “difficult to work with”. While I think this trend is slowly diminishing, the importance of prestigious institutions like Harvard engaging scientists with those across other

disciplines and taking a more active role in the process of public engagement (not just the occasional practice) is ever increasing.

My active engagement in discussions at the conference as well as my opportunity to present a poster on behalf of Science in the News, I was able to interface specifically with individuals across nations who were interested in helping us out with some of our areas of struggle, as well as the other way around- us helping nations and institutions where a model like Science in the News would be greatly beneficial for scientific trainees and the general public.

### **Science Communication in Different Countries**

By nature of this being a science communication conference, I had the opportunity to understand how diverse public understanding of and involvement in scientific research actually is. In general, scientific funding and attitudes towards funding scientific research are unsurprisingly correlated with the amount of resources available (for example, much higher in more developed nations). Unfortunately, many countries are also limited due to the political climate- in some cases including severe forms of censorship. Some of the countries presenting keynotes showed that there was “not much” of science communication in certain countries because they really is not much which realistically can be achieved with the regulations in place.

This was eye-opening for many reasons, but namely the fact that I, and likely many others, take for granted the freedom of speech we are granted in the United States. We, for the most part, have the luxury of internet access, social media and just plain access to information. However, this experience made me feel as though we sometimes squander these resources with very little reason. In the United States, as some of the researchers aptly pointed out in beautiful studies, we have a unique problem in that no matter how much information or how many facts are presented, individuals will rarely, if ever, sway their decisions to align with facts- rather, their decisions, namely voting behaviors, seem to align with their own personal values. For me as a scientist, it is difficult to understand how access to information or facts cannot sway a general public to vote or make decisions one way or the other. To understand how we as scientists at a leading institution can attempt to make amends and find compromise in light of this is a tremendous endeavor that we must at least try to tackle in collaboration with social scientists. How we as scientists hold communicators, by profession, accountable, and how the public (experts in other disciplines) can hold us accountable is an ever-evolving state of affairs that we can only address by engaging with each other.

I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to interface with some of the top names in science communication, as well as engage with people from many different backgrounds and countries. At scientific conferences within our fields, we are very likely to only see a subset of nations represented, as well as a select number of topics. Here, since almost everyone had their own distinct story and path, I was able to gain a unique perspective on the world, using science communication as a window. I’m thankful for my participation in Science in the News, and importantly, being a student in the Division of Medical Sciences, and I hope to take the connections I made here through the years, wherever the wind takes me.