

The University of Hong Kong
Department of Psychology

Departmental Seminar

***A panopticon on science communication:
Some historical and contemporary considerations***

Date: December 17, 2013 (Tuesday)
Time: 2:30 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.
Venue: CPD-2.42, 2/F, Central Podium Level, Centennial Campus, HKU
Speaker: Mr. Ludovic Garattini
PhD Candidate
Paris Sorbonne University

Sciences and technologies (S&Ts) have become an international leitmotif for governances. It is both explicitly and implicitly believed that the holy grail out of our global crises—economic, environmental and social—is to intertwine more than before S&Ts with the economic model of growth. In a recent press release, the European Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Sciences proudly mentioned that her budget has been "the only major programme in the EU's new budget that sees an increase in resources". The budget almost doubled, from less than 50 billion Euros to 80 billion Euros. In a time of so-called "global crisis," when every penny is worth an epic fight, and "austerity" measures taken by governments with inflating debts, this represents a serious commitment.

However, investing so much hope and resources in S&Ts could not come at a worse time in terms of their public acceptance. As observed in 2000 in a report by the House of Lords in UK, "society's relationship with science is in a critical phase". The global defiance towards S&Ts is so degraded—think Fukushima—that the need to communicate science has consequently become a top priority. Not surprisingly, a secondary European program called MEDIA has also seen his budget massively increased: projects regarding science, research and technology will be generously funded in order to facilitate cultural dissemination of S&Ts. The overall strategy is complex, but in short, the public is thought has being ignorant, needing to know more in order to make sure this growing defiance does not lead to further widening the abyss between the public and sciences.

But what does it mean to "communicate science"? Are we certain that the communicative habits our modern society has incorporated are not participating in creating the problem more than solving it?

This talk will present the historic rehearsal the modern society has staged for more than 200 years in communicating knowledge and sciences, demonstrating that, nowadays, the real issue is not that much about how to communicate sciences per se, but to understand what this long history of communicating scientific knowledge has overlooked, and the dead-ends it has created, if the ultimate challenge is to overcome our contemporary global crises.

The presentation will also describe the manufacturing of elements in the 17th, 18th, and 19th century that created the very space within which the actual communication of sciences to the "lay persons" is still operating today. I will argue that rather than helping bridging the gap between science and the public, "popular science" might actually participate in creating and keeping the distance. Finally, we will open the discussion to the role we want science communication to play today, showing that the research in our field might help proposing new perspectives to the communicational side of our disciplines, whether they belong to humanities, social, or natural sciences.

