



## MEMO 2: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT (IN THE TIMES OF CRISIS)

This is the second two-page memo that Utrecht University's [Open Science Intervision and Advice Team \(OSIAT\)](#) issues. What is public engagement, why is public engagement important for an Open Science university and how can it be organized and done, also in the times of crisis or tense public debate? This memo gives a succinct overview of the take-aways on these three questions in the order they are posed; this overview is based on the discussion that took place at the OSIAT's meeting of December 2024.

### 1. What is Public Engagement (in the times of crisis)?

Public engagement, one of the key pillars of Open Science, covers the different ways in which research can be shared with a wide audience. It also involves a co-production element – thanks to the interaction with relevant groups of society, new scientific knowledge can emerge. This is therefore a two-way street: there is interaction, involvement and a meaningful dialogue between university and society with the aim that these activities benefit both parties. This is based on an “[integral vision of society](#)”: University and science do not exist in a vacuum, society needs them and also impacts the universities and science, and the same holds the other way round. Society offers plenty of information and research questions which can advance science. Public engagement *in the times of crisis* refers to taking up relevant activities in the time where there is a tense public debate – also on the role of the universities and of science – with possible polarization and extremely divergent views on specific matters. It also refers to the interactions between scientists and society at the time of difficult situations, such as strikes, social unrests and (military) conflicts.

### 2. Why is public engagement important for an Open Science university?

The [relevant webpage of UU](#) gives the following answer to this question: “To allow society to reap all potential benefits of research, we should not just make results available. We should also engage with potential users, funders and contributors to research, and with people whose lives may be affected by it. This calls for activities to raise interest in research, <...>to engage people with the research process, to translate outcomes for a non-scholarly public and to participate in public debate. This implies we seriously listen to what people outside our own community and outside academia have to say. Public engagement helps researchers to more closely relate to societal issues and to questions people have. It helps researchers to profit from input and ideas from outside academia. And it helps enhance support for and trust in scholarly research.” During our meeting, useful links and publications stressing this point have been shared. Thus, as [Turnhout et al. \(2013\)](#) state, addressing complex issues such as climate change and food security have led to constructive transformations in science itself and has required “to organize the production and use of scientific knowledge” differently (see, also [Collins and Evans ‘The Third Wave of Science Studies: Studies of Expertise and Experience’ \(2002\)](#)). Bridging the gap between the production and use of scientific knowledge via new roles and forms of communications and interaction between scientists and society is argued to be necessary to “increase the quality, effectiveness, and legitimacy of solutions to societal and environmental problems”. As our guest speaker, professor of public engagement and oceanology Erik van Sebille, also pointed out: *meaningful* public engagement can align science better with societal needs and enhance trust in science, also thanks to promoting other key pillars of Open Science – open access publications and sharing data in accordance with FAIR principles (see also the co-authored [publication of UU public engagement fellows](#) on this issue).

### 3. How can it be done, also in the times of crisis or tense public debate?

Public engagement requires relevant institutional organization and activities at the individual (researcher's and research group's) level. At the institutional level, support is essential to 1. promote individual and groups' motivation for such activities and 2. help with acquiring and advancing relevant skills and offering equipment and organizational support. At UU, the institutional organization has been developed for both of the mentioned points. UU's recognition and reward policies, including development and promotion policies, have been adjusted to include public engagement as an essential element of our work at University. Research groups are expected to support and recognize this, also as this element is part of the assessment of research groups pursuant to SEP protocol. Furthermore,



the [Centre for Science and Culture](#) (CSC) plays an important role in realizing engagement between researchers and citizens at UU. With an extended network of researchers, the CSC develops public engagement programs, projects, and internal training and development, among others through the [Science Hub](#), [Studium Generale](#), [Parnassos Cultural Centre](#), and the [University Museum](#). Finally, some scientists face intimidation and aggression, because of their public engagement on a sensitive subject. The UU takes this issue very seriously. [Contact Point SafeScience](#) as well as intervision sessions called '[Scholars in the Public Arena](#)' have been established to support scientists in such cases.

How to do public engagement? Our discussion has revealed a number of typical forms of activities that scientists from different disciplines have undertaken: public media interviews, newspaper articles and opinion pieces, public talks at festivals and symposia, activities at secondary schools or at the UU weekend of Science, guest lessons at schools, patient engagement, advice and consultancy work, etc.

At the individual level (researcher or team), planning public engagement activities may require considering a number of questions relating to the role of the individual researchers and to that of their research team and community. In preparation for, and discussions during our meeting, we identified a number of questions that scientists need to be aware of; we devoted attention to two sets of questions: which roles can and should scientists play in their interactions with society, and: what can academic activism be, and when do, or should, scientists engage in activism? Typical issues that need to be taken into account in these situations are: the degree of readiness for public engagement and how we can best prepare for such activities, the difference between advocacy and activism, the role the scientist should play, the content of the engagement, and the timing of the activity.

'Better safe than sorry' could be a good departing point for a scientist and a research team/community, which means it is important to **prepare for public engagement**. Not everybody is a natural speaker or can deal with the unpredictable outcomes of interactions. Not everyone may anticipate all possible benefits or risks of such interactions. It is highly advisable to follow relevant **communication, presentation and leadership courses**. There is a whole science behind effective communication, which can certainly help scientists to convey their messages across different types of stakeholders. Preparation is also useful in terms of **informing relevant colleagues** (research team and communications' sections) who could help before, during and after public engagement. One of the things to **discuss with your research team** is the **role that the scientist in their discipline could and should play** given the state of the art on specific topics in science. The '*evidence-based public engagement*' based on consensus in a specific scientific field within a divergent group of scientists can help individual scientists and groups to gain trust, to promote their scientific goals, and to give support to relevant societal groups and processes. The question scientists should ask themselves is in how far their message is their personal opinion or that of their research community, at what stage of consensus scientific research is on that issue, and what this could mean for society. In any case, it is essential to be explicit about these issues in communication with the public one is engaging with in order to **ensure transparency, trust and legitimacy of such interactions** (see also [Oreskes 'Why Trust Science?'](#) (2019)). (Related to this, which publics we are reaching out to, why they specifically are the focus of the engagement, and who benefits and how?) Our discussion went about the following issues. If scientific consensus is not obvious, is it more useful to present this very fact, discuss various views and explain why the issue in question is not obvious, including possible different methodological approaches that are being used and why they could be useful? If research has not produced conclusive results yet, is it useful to present the process and the [virtues](#) involved in adopting a certain methodology, which could promote trust and interest from relevant stakeholders, also for subsequent co-creation? Thus, being aware of the state of the art in one's discipline is crucial here. Our guest speaker from CSC, Stephanie Helfferich, introduced the UU [course 'Scholars in the public arena'](#), which discusses **four roles that are outlined in 'The Honest Broker'**. Furthermore, we distinguished **the advocacy role from activism**. We have discussed that researchers need to show the outside that precisely the possibility, and expertise, to organize a constructive dialogue in situations of uncertainty is a key strength of the science. **Finally, consider on doing public engagement not to get in the spotlight but when you have done research and have something meaningful to say, otherwise, suggest a relevant colleague** for this type of activities – this can also promote team spirit.