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Book review: Handbook of Public Communication of Science and Technology

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Book reviews

K. C. Cole, *Something Incredibly Wonderful Happens: Frank Oppenheimer and the World He Made Up*. Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009. 416 pp. ISBN 978-0-15-100822-3, \$27.00 (hbk)

It was almost a decade ago that I first stumbled upon the story of Frank Oppenheimer. I was procrastinating at the back of the Science Museum library, and should have been revising for a history of physics exam. I was instantly captivated by this story, and have shared it enthusiastically with colleagues and students many times since.

Frank had been inspired into physics by his big brother, “father of the atomic bomb,” Robert Oppenheimer. He worked alongside his brother on the Manhattan Project, and post-war, studying cosmic rays at the University of Minnesota. But Frank had briefly been a member of the communist party in the 1930s, and he was soon blackballed from universities. He sold some art he had inherited from his father, and set up home running a cattle ranch in Colorado. As the local expert in physics, he helped out at the local school. An inventive teacher, he would start thermodynamics lessons with trips to the local dump to collect bits of old engines. Soon the local university came knocking, asking him to share his teaching expertise, and by the end of the 1950s he was back in academia. During a short sabbatical researching bubble chambers and the history of physics at University College London in the mid 1960s, he visited the many science museums of Europe. He returned, inspired to improve on their “hands-on” approach to learning and by the end of the 1960s had opened the Exploratorium in San Francisco, which became a model for science centres all over the world.

For years, all I had to go on for this story was a short bio at the start of Hilde Hein’s *The Exploratorium: The Museum as Laboratory*, the odd legend science centre staff tell each other, snippets in biographies of Robert, and a tribute on the Exploratorium website. I hoped that someday, someone would write a more detailed biography of the younger Oppenheimer, and now K. C. Cole has done

just so. She tells the story quite beautifully too, opening it up in much more detail than my sketch above can do justice. I can recommend *Something Incredibly Wonderful Happens* for the warmth, humour and curiosity of its footnotes alone. I recommend it to readers of this journal in particular because it is a history of twentieth century science communication, something I think we would all do well to reflect more upon. Crucially, it is a history of science communication which shows how the histories of our institutions are embedded not only in a globalised history of science and scientists, but in a history of scientists’ family and personal relationships, eccentricities, communities, politics, policies, institutions, accidents and ideologies. As with the Exploratorium itself, it’s hard not to be enchanted by at least a small part of the book. An engaging read.

Alice Bell

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Massimiano Bucchi and Brian Trench, eds, *Handbook of Public Communication of Science and Technology*. New York: Routledge, 2008. 274 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-38617-3, US\$198.00/£95.00 (hbk)

Despite the fact that education in science communication has improved the coverage and practice of the role of science and technology in society, few practitioners have gone deeply into understanding the multifarious approach of their field. Multidisciplinarity and diversity of points of view are key to the *Handbook of Public Communication of Science and Technology* which deals with complex issues of science communication performed by different actors in diverse arenas. A treasure for students and researchers in the field, it provides motivation to improve actions and work, and a rich guide for teachers willing to renew their repertoire and spice up the discussion with students.

Its aim is to highlight the main debates and challenges in science communication as well as to supply a rich seam of literature and further research to complement the reading of its 17 chapters.

Among the more relevant contributions in this handbook, is a suggestion of a multi-model framework of science communication – the main models (interactive, democratic and participatory) have been interpreted as a chronological sequence or a shift in priorities – depending on the communicative situation designed by expert/society arrangements. Also valuable are the studies of health campaigns that can help our understanding of public perception and of the effectiveness of mass communication activities since health involves a great deal of public engagement, interest and multiple social-cultural dimensions.

Differences in natural and social science communication, here under analysis, motivate reflection on the need to employ a broader concept of science. Contributions from sciences in general, humanities and non-academic actors are major elements in challenging and improving the debate on science and society. In this context, the internet, and its power to “erode the boundaries,” is pointed out as a major shift in communication, as well as a tool

to better understand new perspectives and complex interactions between science and the public.

The book’s focus on analyses from the United States and Europe (especially the UK) indicates a need to strengthen the challenges and experiences in developing and emerging nations, in order to globally address the public engagement effort. Although experiences in India and Africa (particularly South Africa) have not been forgotten, those from China, Mexico and Brazil – which have expanded their influence worldwide and their efforts in science communication – would certainly enrich the perspective.

This informative as well as formative book will foster the knowledge of those entering the science communication field or already well established in it, and may even influence their actions in such an important field.

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**18-20 April 2012
Florence, Italy**

12th International Public Communication of Science and Technology Conference

Quality, Honesty and Beauty in Science Communication

The 12th International PCST (Public Communication of Science and Technology) Conference will be held in Florence, Italy, 18-20 April 2012.

The PCST International Network and the Italian conference hosts have pleasure in inviting you to submit proposals for presentations at this major event.

Proposals are welcome for presentations on science communication and science in society research, science journalism, science museums public engagement with science and technology and communication activities by research institutions.

The deadline for proposals is **30 September, 2011**. Submitted proposals will be reviewed by members of PCST Scientific Committee, and the final programme will be announced in January 2012.

Plenary speeches will be delivered by leading international experts in science communication research and practice. A plenary session on “20 years of *Public Understanding of Science* - Challenges for the Future”, organized in collaboration with SAGE, will feature all previous editors of this journal since 1992: John Durant (MIT), Bruce V. Lewenstein (Cornell), Edna Einsiedel (Calgary) and Martin W Bauer (LSE).

A rich social programme will be offered to conference participants. Guided tours to places of scientific interest in Florence and Tuscany will also be available before and after the conference. Screenings, performances and exhibitions will be presented during the conference.

The official language of the conference is English.

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Organisers and contacts

PCST 2012 is organised by the PCST International Network and hosted by Observa Science in Society Fondazione Giannino Bassetti, Galileo Museum Florence and INAF National Institute for Astrophysics.

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