Miscommunication Between Scientists and Policy Makers as a Threat to Trust and Accountability in Science

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It is over 50 years since the British physicist CP Snow influentially argued that the division into “two cultures” of science and humanities, especially in Britain, damaged our ability to cope with the world’s problems. We have moved on since then but the gulf of understanding between scientists and society remains real. It starts at school. Most science is boringly taught as a series of facts which, it is implied, once learned, will describe the world and how it works. Those students who ignore this apparent dullness and persevere, are often surprised to find that science deals – by definition – with the unknown. There are mysteries to be solved. Most research is heading in the wrong direction most of the time, but when a discovery is made it is revelatory, even if sometimes in a quite minor way. Contrary to what is taught, science is the antithesis of a canon of received wisdom: when done well (not always) it is sceptical, imaginative, disruptive, and transgressive. No wonder there’s often misunderstanding when society, usually in the form of media and politicians, demand simple reassurance on complex scientific issues. Scientists are used to the idea that there’s much we just don’t know; non-scientists find this frustrating (after all, where does all the money go?). Scientists can exploit the separation of the two cultures to political effect. In general, decision makers are used to being lobbied by others of the political classes. As the UK pressure group the Campaign for Science and Engineering (formerly Save British Science) exemplifies, when scientists decide to enter the fray themselves, their foreign-ness, coupled with a deeply ingrained reliance on evidence, can be surprisingly influential.