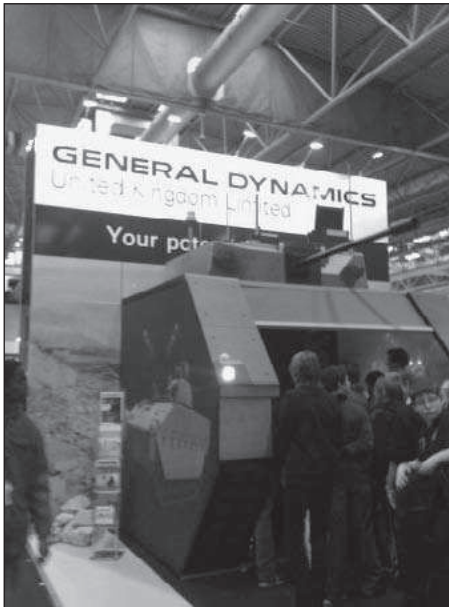


Challenging corporate influence within science communication

Alice Bell argues that corporate sponsorship of science communication has gone too far, and announces a new campaign to challenge it.

You might have heard of the Big Bang Fair.¹ A major part of National Science and Engineering Week, it attracts tens of thousands of schoolchildren every year. It's run by Engineering UK in partnership with various science and engineering organisations, but supported by a host of industrial sponsors, one of which is BAE Systems.² It's tempting to crack a joke about arms manufactures knowing their big bangs – except that glamorising weapons isn't funny...



General Dynamics' mock-up of a tank at the Big Bang Fair

When a peace campaigner stumbled across the event last spring, she found that BAE had more than just space for a logo, it had a stall where they were handing out toy submarines. Disgusted by this and by several of the other stalls she spotted, she posted a gallery of pictures online (see photo), commenting "basically it's an arms fair for children with a bit of environmental destruction thrown in for good measure". If the Big Bang Fair makes you uncomfortable, you might want to avoid the Science Museum. Their Energy Futures gallery is sponsored BP; their content on climate science bears a Shell logo.³

I'm not necessarily against the corporate sponsorship of science communication. I'd rather such things were funded through taxation, but I'm also pragmatic. I paid my way through university with a

job at the Science Museum, staffing several of the sponsored galleries and events. I judged last year's Google Science Fair. I've written for newspapers that carry advertising. I didn't feel limited by any of these sponsors. In fact, I loved sharing Capital FM's old equipment with schoolchildren in the Science Museum's old hands-on radio gallery, and I thought Google used its brand effectively to connect teenagers with some inspiring ideas. It's worth noting the Science Museum's collection has roots in the old Patent Office museum; that's where they obtained Stephenson's Rocket. Industry is part of science and, when you can tap into it, holds a lot of expertise.

But there are questions to be raised about who is involved in science communication, as well as the nature and transparency of deals with publicly funded institutions. There's been a fair amount of criticism of the sponsorship of the arts in recent years, with groups like Liberate Tate and Reclaim Our Bard drawing particular attention to the role of oil money in galleries and theatre. And yet, there's been little activism around science in public culture. There was a press release from Scientists for Global Responsibility and Campaign Against Arms Trade condemning BAE's involvement in the Big Bang Fair when it first launched in 2009,⁴ but that's about it. Mention the Science Museum to environmental activists and they'll refer to the Shell sponsorship with some disdain, but you are much more likely to find them on the roof of the National Gallery.

Perhaps this is due to the same reason that science museums also complain that it's hard to get sponsorship: science lacks the mainstream sparkle of arts. At best, kids' stuff, at worst a bit esoteric and dull. I also suspect it's caused by a lack of political awareness (let alone active criticism) within the science communication profession, and within much of the scientific community at large.

What science lacks in glamour, it more than makes up for in allusions to authority, openness, honesty and rigour. There's a reason shampoo adverts carry a science bit, and I'm not sure I want public institutions to be used to provide such ethos. I also worry that, especially in an age of creeping cuts, science communication professionals will avoid working on anything too critical or controversial, lest they put a future crucial sponsorship deal at risk. I worry corporate PR ends up capturing a lot of publicly funded creative endeavour, initially financed through science or culture budgets.

Done well, the public communication of science is more than feeding knowledge to the masses and ensuring the next generation of undergraduates (though that's important too). It's a chance to take research out of its bounded ivory towers and enrich it with a broader perspective. It's a chance to think about the science we do, why and how. It's a chance to make the science we want, not just blithely pass on the science we've been given. It has incredible transformative power. And the UK is a world leader in the field. We spent a few hundred years building some amazing science communication institutions. That's a precious resource.

Science communication needs to see industry as more than just moneybags; to stand up for itself, and use sponsorship deals as a chance to further open up industry to public discussion, appreciation and scrutiny. Science communication needs to use industry, not be used by it. We all need to be asking questions. Otherwise, who is sponsoring whom exactly?

A new campaign – Science Unstained – has recently been launched to raise awareness of these issues. Find out more at <http://scienceunstained.co.uk/>

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