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Science at the café

The Italian physicist, Paolo Politi from the Institute for Complex Systems in Florence is not only dedicated to meeting the challenges of theoretical physics but those of public discussion of science and technology, too. He is president of the non-profit organisation "Caffè-Scienza", which has in Florence created a very special platform for debate: the Café Scientifique. To Humboldt Kosmos, Politi described the aims and ideas behind science cafés, which are a very successful format for communicating science throughout the world.

Over a glass of wine or a cup of coffee experts and amateurs, old and young, discuss stem-cell research, the risks of nuclear energy or personal rights in the age of the Internet. There is no topic that can't become the topic of a science café. Even if a scientist does open the event with a short talk – the Café Scientifique is not a lecture or lesson. The object of the science café is to create a place where a broad public can meet to discuss science and exchange views in a relaxed atmosphere.

The first Cafés Scientifique came into being in France and England ten years ago. From there, the idea swept across the world: today, there are hundreds of cafés in dozens of countries with new ones starting up continuously. The form a café takes and the way it is run depends to a large degree on regional conditions and traditions. In Florence, for example, the Café Scientifique takes place once a month on Thursday at the Circolo SMS-Rifredi, a mutual aid society, organised by the non-profit organisation "Caffè-Scienza". But what they all do have in common is the idea on which they are based: science cafés facilitate democratic dialogue between science and society. The experience of the first few years shows that certain "ingredients" are necessary to ensure the success of an event: A dedicated organiser or team of organisers and an appropriate venue are just as important as an engaged facilitator and inspiring speakers presenting science and technology. But, in the last resort, it is the audience which determines whether an event is successful or not – whereby the

word "audience" is only partially accurate because they tend to be active participants rather than passive consumers. The relaxed atmosphere of a café or bar provides the right setting for free and open discussions which would be out of the question in a university lecture theatre.

There are several reasons why this unique form of science communication emerged at the end of the 1990s: momentous events such as the reactor accident at Chernobyl or the BSE crisis in Europe led to a situation in which the population desperately needed information but were becoming increasingly suspicious of the experts providing it. In fact, the public also discovered that experts may be in disagreement not only on obscure questions discussed at a conference, but also during a TV debate. Whenever science and technology affect people's daily lives, questions start being asked about the causes, effects and consequences. In the light of new scientific knowledge and methods, ethical problems have to be solved, too. Another reason for increased interest in tackling scientific issues derives from better living conditions: people are able to spend more of their time considering how they should live and less on how they can survive. Science cafés try to support the opinion making process and satisfy the thirst for information. Scientists abandon their offices and labs in order to debate with ordinary laypeople or to be active themselves.

It takes a lot of engaged and optimistic people for non-profit initiatives like science cafés to come into being and establish themselves on a firm basis. Science cafés are initiated and organised both by individuals and by groups. In some places the cafés cooperate with universities and research institutes. Some are supported by public or private bodies, others support themselves: The Science Café in Lugano (CH), for example, is organised by "Science et Cité", a foundation promoting dialogue between science and society. In Argentina, the Planetarium in Buenos Aires and the Palaeontology Museum in Trelew, Patagonia, run science cafés. The British Council, a non-departmental public body for cultural relations, organises Cafés Scientifiques in many countries, including Mexico, Slovenia, Germany and Russia.

Anyone wanting to find out when and where the next science café is taking place nearby can consult the Internet. A good starting point is www.cafescientifique.org, where you can find a comprehensive overview of

activities worldwide, and it is also a meeting point for the community. In future (in some cases, at present), cooperation with journals or radio stations and use of Internet resources (blog, streaming) are planned to extend the range of the science café and open it up to a broader public.

There is no need to worry about the future of science cafés. As in so many areas, it lies – at least to some degree – in the hands of young people: In order to utilise the natural curiosity of the young and lessen their inhibitions about participating in public debate, in the last few years so-called Junior Cafés have started up in France and spread in Great Britain and elsewhere. They specifically target pupils and students and are organised with and through them. In the light of these new developments and the continually increasing interest in grass-roots open knowledge events, Duncan Dallas, one of the founding fathers of the Café Scientifique, is optimistic, “The future is bright!”

Additional Information

<http://www.cipast.org>

The European network for the citizen participation in science and technology.

<http://www.loka.org>

A Washington DC-based institute whose mission is to ensure public engagement and participation in all matters relating to science and technology.

((The author))

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