SiS.net interviewed Carolina Moreno-Castro, the coordinator of CONCISE to learn more about the project’s valuable work.

**PROJECT DETAILS**

*Title:* Communication role on perception and beliefs of EU Citizens about Science

*Acronym:* CONCISE

*Website:* https://concise-h2020.eu/

*Coordinator:* Prof. Dr. Carolina Moreno-Castro, University of Valencia in Spain

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*Duration:* 01/12/2018 – 31/01/2021

*Partners:* 9 institutions from Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain

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Carolina Moreno-Castro: The CONCISE project’s main objective is to find out how Europeans build their opinions on science and technology and who influences this process, e.g. regarding topics such as vaccinations or genetically modified organisms. To learn more about this, we wanted to know which information sources and channels citizens trust when looking for science and technology topics. It is particularly relevant to understand how citizens’ opinions and attitudes are formed. For example, what role do friends, communicators, journalists, influencers, family, colleagues, religion or political views play?

We wanted to learn about people’s attitudes and beliefs about science via citizen consultations. CONCISE is therefore a research project that is based on the collection of qualitative data. I have been studying media routes and journalistic training for a long time. However, I have never had the opportunity to explore how people feel about science. The citizen consultations were held in five European cities: Valencia, Lisbon, Trnava, Lodz and Vicenza with 497 participants from Poland, Slovakia, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Obviously, this is not representative of Europe as a whole, but it still gives us valuable insights. Since the consultations were about people getting in touch with people, having a mutual exchange, explaining views and spending a whole day debating about different points and topics, we were lucky that the consultations took place in 2019 as it would have been impossible during the pandemic.

Seeing the participants so engaged and enjoying their participation has been a very rewarding experience for me. They considered it a great opportunity to explain their beliefs, their passions and, in some cases, also their negative feelings about the lack of information or the lack of trust in public institutions. We picked nice, comfortable venues for the public consultations to create a pleasant atmosphere. Furthermore, we even had a childcare service because we wanted everyone to be able to attend the consultation without any problems.

Carolina Moreno-Castro: The main findings of the project have been a surprise for me because they are very similar across all countries. There are some differences, obviously, but not that many. The results showed a preference for traditional media, for instance TV. In Spain, Portugal and Italy, e.g., TV was mentioned most often in the consultations, followed by digital media such as social networks and the internet in general. In Slovakia and Poland, citizens used social networks more often as a source of information. Citizens preferred institutional sources throughout, especially international sources like WHO or IPCC, and national governance over private organizations. Another relevant finding was that participants feel ambivalent about the quantity of science information: some responded that there is a lack of information while at the same time voicing the impression that there is an overload of information. This ambivalence is very interesting for me as a researcher.

Another point was the quality of the information. Citizens felt very critical of misinformation, fake news or science information of an overall bad quality. They highlighted sensationalism, superficiality, contradictions, politicization, and the circulation of fake news. They pointed out that science communicators or journalists have a responsibility when using and disseminating science news, which they should exercise. They felt that sometimes communicators choose sensationalistic pictures over delivering information clearly and transparently.

We also detected an ambivalence regarding the issue of trust: In all five countries, citizens showed special confidence in proximity sources, like family, friends and family doctors, but also in institutional and government information.

Digital media have often been perceived as providing less reliable science information. Studies funded by private companies are also trusted less. To verify information, many of our participants, assessed the sources as to who supported it, searched for confirmation from other sources, and relied on their personal experience and common sense.

When I was reading the consultation transcriptions in March and April of 2020, I was locked down in my house and I was thinking about how topical the project was. Let us take notice of the citizens’ suggestions.
Carolina Moreno-Castro: Yes, indeed. As mentioned before, the similarities in responses across the participating countries came as a surprise. However, the data from each country must be further analysed in the context of the local cultural and social reality.

One other point particularly surprised me: there is no association of professionalized science communicators in Poland and Slovakia while in Spain, Portugal and Italy, we have science communicator associations and great activism from the part of science communicators. Citizens from all five countries, however, asked for more skills and training for science journalists. They demanded clear and transparent science information, especially regarding details of an official nature, and wanted to see possible biases favouring companies that finance studies or research eliminated.

SiS.net: Did one consultation result particularly surprise you?

Carolina Moreno-Castro: Yes, indeed. As mentioned before, the similarities in responses across the participating countries came as a surprise. However, the data from each country must be further analysed in the context of the local cultural and social reality.

In all countries, people asked for better access to science information, e.g., debates with experts. In Spain, e.g., TV debates are usually held with politicians or journalists, but not with scientists. Why do we not have more scientists participate in TV programmes and discussions or explain science in short videos on social media? Not doing this may increase the risk of having misinformation circulate and spread like an epidemic, overshadowing the factual information. This is why we formulated practical policy recommendations in an online EU Policy Dialogue on Science Communication hosted by CONCISE in November 2020 and everybody can access the publications about policy recommendations and citizen consultations on the CONCISE website.

SiS.net: CONCISE has also worked on policy recommendations. What can policymakers do for quality science communication?

Carolina Moreno-Castro: We can provide some tips, I guess. One is to provide support to scientists. In the five countries where we held the consultations, scientists had not received any funding or incentives for the dissemination and the popularization of science. Before, scientists did science, and that was it.
That is changing, however, and being a scientist now also comprises the dissemination of science. Politicians should support this change and provide funds for the popularization of science or the transfer of knowledge to society. Furthermore, universities and public research centres should play a more central role in the dissemination of science. Another point could be to promote websites, databases, fact-checking services or science shops.

It would be great for European citizens if our recommendations were taken up since this would enable them to access comprehensible science information easily and for free. Many citizens do not have much knowledge in this area and would benefit from this. In our consultation, we took care that the participants’ level of education at a given table was homogeneous to prevent participants from feeling intimidated. We mixed young people, older people, urban and rural people at the tables, but grouped them according to their level of education. The feedback showed that they all felt comfortable; none of them felt embarrassed about their statements. I think this is relevant when trying to engage citizens.

Another recommendation is to include communication skills and training in university studies. At the moment, you can study to obtain a science degree, and at the end, you will know a lot about your discipline, your field, but you will have not acquired any communication skills.

So, these are some policy recommendations that we think could be implemented easily. None are costly or complicated. All are feasible and reasonable.


SiS.net: What do you wish for the results of CONCISE and science communication in general?

Carolina Moreno-Castro: Regarding the CONCISE project, I would very much like to replicate the citizen consultations in different European countries, perhaps addressing other burning topics. It could also be interesting to repeat the citizen consultations ten years later with the same people to test the changes in their perceptions. Basically, I would like to have the opportunity to carry out other citizen consultations in Europe, applying the knowledge learned and looking for other interesting points about misinformation and disinformation. Especially now that we have developed a published standard, a protocol which can serve as a tool kit on how to do a public consultation.

Above all, however, I would like to see the CONCISE recommendations implemented in public policies in different countries in order to contribute to making the general audience aware of how science works (the uncertainty, the scientific methods, risk assessment, etc.). Moreover, communicators and journalists should be careful about the science information they disseminate – explaining that science is a process, and that results are not obtained in 24 hours. For this, it is necessary to have a science culture which is more accessible for society. Students need to receive good training at school. During university studies, there should be communication subjects so that students acquire communication skills. Furthermore, science institutions, public institutions in general, should hire skilled science communicators to disseminate and communicate science information. I hope that there will be a greater awareness in general of how important good science communication is.

THREE CONCISE KEY MESSAGES:

• Greatest success: Making citizens happy, engaged, and involved to be participating in the CONCISE public consultations.

• Biggest challenge accomplished: Establishing the protocol used to carry out the public consultations and a standard for analysing and comparing the data obtained from it.

• The best recommendation for science communicators: Increasing the use of social media (particularly for engaging younger audiences), offering content in suitable formats (videos, infographics), using clear language and taking advantage of the two-way communication afforded by digital platforms.