

How do I engage the public with a controversial issue?

Effectively engaging audiences on difficult topics

Engaging the public with controversial issues can seem daunting. However, having effective discussions about these issues can result in long-term benefits both to your work and to its impact on society. This guide will help prepare you for difficult conversations and discussing tricky subjects with the public in a productive way.

1 | Why engage the public with controversial issues?

To establish trust

Ignoring public concerns erodes confidence in science and scientists. By establishing a dialogue with other groups, particularly those affected by your research, concerns can be shared and addressed. Demonstrating you are committed to listening and responding to concerns will build trust and respect.

To repair relationships

Members of the public may have had negative experiences in the past, either with science in general or with a particular issue. They may have suffered as a result of a bad interaction elsewhere. Engaging these groups in the right way can help to repair damaged relationships.

To uphold democracy

Research and innovation can have a significant impact on wider society. It is important that members of the public are heard and can input into our research when appropriate, particularly when it enters the public domain. This does not mean we need to give the public authority over everything we do but it is vital we consult the public, particularly groups that are affected by our research.

To avoid further controversy

If your research area is already contentious, engaging with the public early can prevent controversy in the future. Through engagement you can begin to understand the concerns of the public, appreciate their perspectives and learn about unintended implications of your research area. This will give you a better chance to address unforeseen or future problems.

Note:

Engaging the public with controversial issues is not about trying to convert everyone to your point of view. The aim of discussions should be about facilitating, listening to and understanding different perspectives, ideas and concerns. By being more aware of these and having more positive relationships with stakeholders, your work in future is likely to be improved and better received.

2 | Trust, power and how issues become controversial

Science has a large impact on society but it can at times seem inaccessible to the public. This creates a power dynamic and controversy can occur when people feel this dynamic has been misused. Members of the public might see themselves as having very limited control when it comes to the decisions that affect them directly. They may also have important insights which they feel are being ignored. Engagement can help to manage controversy through giving the public a voice and enabling us to listen and act on their concerns.

Even when we put all of the above into place, controversies can still persist. This usually involves topics that are emotionally triggering or are tied into a person's social identity, such as the beliefs of family members or their cultural background. In these cases, showing some more data or using the most persuasive arguments will have little impact as a person's feelings on a subject or their social loyalties are more important to them. It might be most helpful to try to engage these groups in more open and in-depth dialogue, which can identify areas of common ground, and use this as a foundation to build new relationships.

Note:

According to research from the Institute for Global Ethics, there are a number of key character traits that as humans we all expect from one another, regardless of our background. These include trustworthiness, fairness, honesty, compassion and respect. This is what we expect from all authorities including the police force and our government. It is worth being mindful that this is what the public expect from scientific institutions too, and it is important to uphold these characteristics.

3 | Principles for public engagement with controversial issues

These key principles may be useful to keep in mind when planning public engagement with controversial issues:

- **Share** – Be honest about your research, its boundaries, and any potential negative outcomes. It is important that members of the public are aware of these issues so they can offer their own input. Downplaying issues risks damaging the relationship between researchers and the public if they become bigger problems later.
- **Listen** – Don't ignore the concerns that surround your research, and be open to new ideas and perspectives. During your public engagement activity allow people to be heard and try not to shut down relevant areas of discussion. Listening doesn't just mean letting someone speak. It means making an effort to understand their point of view.
- **Address** – Show that you are prepared to address concerns. You might highlight steps you already plan to take, or you might ask your audience for their input. Taking on board their suggestions is a step towards inclusivity and trust.

- **Clarify** – Try to be well-prepared, explain key ideas and be clear to avoid confusion which may be frustrating for audiences.
- **Have an open mindset** – Key to engaging the public with controversial issues is keeping an open mindset. Be prepared to find out and consider others' perspectives and hear their ideas, and you will be more likely to have productive and positive discussions.

Note:

Due to the sensitive nature of controversial issues, it is important to ensure that your discussions are designed in an open way to facilitate dialogue and the sharing of values, interests, needs and fears. See our guidance on discussion and dialogue for more tips on good practice.

Engagement Masterclass

Attend our Masterclass: 'Engagement with controversial issues' for further ideas.

Things to remember

Controversial topics are part and parcel of working in many scientific fields. It is perfectly possible to engage with the public in a meaningful way around a controversial topic, as long as we are mindful of the following things:

- It's rare that you'll find yourself in a difficult situation, but it might help to have a plan in place or some ideas for tricky scenarios. Try to remember: this is not personal. Remember you are not alone in this and while you do not need to represent your whole group or take on its entire burden, you can offer your insights as one individual. You are also not there to be attacked. You can move the conversation on, close an area of discussion or even conclude the activity if you feel uncomfortable.
- Trying to understand where people are coming from will help you to plan and deliver engagement that you will both enjoy more. If you can try to understand why people feel the way they do, then you may be able to accommodate this in your framing, content and activities.
- Empathise with others and look for connections. If you are at the receiving end of a loud or emotional rant, stay calm and focus on the issues. Remember that this person may be feeling powerless or upset by previous events. Try to work towards a mutual understanding or opportunities for change. Consider where your shared interests or perspectives are and use these as a basis for discussion.
- This is your work. You are here to discuss the issues surrounding your research or subject area, something you are knowledgeable and passionate about. Focus on what you know best and don't be afraid to make people aware when something is outside your expertise.
- It is not about converting everyone to your point of view. Your aims for engagement should be around understanding different perspectives, ideas and concerns rather than trying to persuade others to agree with you. By exploring issues through open discussion you can facilitate more productive relationships and research going forward.

Case study: True Cut (workshops and performance)

What is it?

'True Cut' is a theatre piece focused on the sensitive issue of mistakes in surgery and the impacts on those involved. The topic is emotive and covers the roles that different individuals play in these situations.

Why is it a good example?

The script was co-developed by healthcare professionals, community members and actors, involving many different voices and perspectives. A discussion followed the performance, involving a diverse panel and facilitating the sharing of views from the wider audience.

Those watching the performance were advised in advance that they might find some of the content upsetting, and leaflets were distributed explaining the research project from which the performance was created and where to find more information.



Related links and resources - Let us know of others!

- [Dealing with an angry public: A mutual gains approach to resolving disputes. – L Susskind & P Field](#) -This book provides a six-step approach to resolving disputes with members of the public in a mutually beneficial way. It will be especially useful if you are having longer conversations with specific groups.
- [Dealing with emotional audiences – Institute for Local Government](#) - This short PDF provides some tips to engaging the public with emotionally-charged topics. It is written from a governmental perspective but the techniques can be applied to public engagement with science.