

# Hurdles for Free Debate Charter

BY JOAN LEACH

**Science Minister Kim Carr wants “charters” that oblige scientists to engage openly in debates on science-based issues, but implementing this worthy aim is not straightforward and protecting it requires funding and formal provisions.**

Senator Kim Carr has raised the expectations of scientists that they are welcome as public contributors to formulating policy on science-based issues. He talks about the “rights and responsibilities” of scientists to communicate more broadly. It is inadequate, however, to claim blandly that “scientists should communicate” because it is good. In reality there are many justifications.

For instance, it is their professional obligation as individual researchers. Prof Bryan Gaensler, an astronomer at the University of Sydney, exemplifies what young researchers can do as public communicators.

There is a parallel obligation for their institutions. CSIRO is a particular target as it tries to shake off its dismal “own goal” – a highly restrictive “Policy on Public Comment” with disciplinary provisions that was devised and policed by a former tobacco executive. While this policy has been relaxed, the openness suggested by Carr is suspect when CSIRO still needs ministerial approval for press releases that touch on “key messages” such as health, science education, research reform and climate change.

Then there is a scientist’s obligation as a citizen and ethical obligation as a public intellectual. Australia has had too few in the science area like Ian Lowe, Tim Flannery, the late Peter Cullen and

Margaret Wertheim.

Finally, and potentially most influential for researchers in the humanities as well as science, is their obligation “to communicate” on the back of funding.

Carr seems to be favouring a policy of “open access” to scientific publications for Australia, too. This sounds sensible but there’s a sting in the tail that is illustrated by US experience. Under direction from Congress, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) requires all grantees to engage in “outreach” – they can’t use the money for, say, better lasers.

NIH grantees must make the papers they publish freely available to the public. The NIH runs PubMedCentral (PMC), a free digital archive of journal literature from the biomedical and life sciences. All articles in PMC are free. PMC says it “aims to fill the role of a world-class library in the digital age. It is not a journal publisher.”

Prof Mary Ganguli, a psychiatrist who researches dementia at the University of Pittsburgh, has related her experience. Despite being a world-class researcher at a world-class institution, she has been the victim of the unsupported communication mandate that tells researchers to do something without monetary support.

For Ganguli this means putting her papers in prestigious journals on PMC, but the journals dislike this intensely.



Dr Joan Leach is Editor of *Social Epistemology*. Photo: Chris Stacey, University of Queensland

Why would other researchers looking for Ganguli’s work pay the journal for an article that they can already get for free?

To counter this, the journals levy a fee on researchers. Ganguli reports: “My tier one journal charges 1500 pounds sterling; I have not seen a figure lower than US\$600 at any journal yet”.

Researchers eventually charge such fees to their grants, so eventually the taxpayer will pay twice for the research. Then, there are questions about protection of copyright and intellectual property, the foundation for potential commercialisation.

Australian scientists will have to face demands from these obligations. Will a university give a scientist tenure on the back of his/her excellent communication? Further, there are time implications and how a researcher knows what is defined as ethical and what is not.

Scientists should certainly communicate more broadly, but this is not as straightforward as it appears and provisions need to be “written in” to any legislation or policy that demands it. Minister Carr will also need to win the necessary monetary and institutional support for the communication of science.

Dr Joan Leach convenes the Science Communication Program in the University of Queensland. *conScience* is a column for Australians to express forthright views on national issues. Views expressed are those of the author.