

UNAMirada a la ciencia, science communication to previously unattended public

Claudia Juárez

Ángel Figueroa

Alfonso A. Fernández

Adriana Bravo

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)

Dirección General de Divulgación de la Ciencia (DGDC)

Dirección de Medios (DM)

adrianabravowilliams@gmail.com

Abstract

In 2006, public communication of science in newspapers was limited. Only a few newspapers had permanent science sections.

A particular newspaper was identified, read by a wide sector of the population in the center of the country. It is a general information newspaper with an outstanding police section that makes it one of the most read newspapers in Mexico, with 300 thousand daily newspapers and around one million 200 thousand potential readers every day.

Nonetheless, their readers hadn't been contemplated in projects in communication of science. From there, an idea came of proposing to the newspaper's directives the collaboration of "UNAMirada a la ciencia". It is a weekly section with contents that explain the investigation of "Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)" in a simple language with close to Earth topics in order to facilitate the comprehension of the scientific information and its impact in society.

This work presents the development of "UNAMirada a la ciencia" in its 9 years of existence. It explains its importance in other media and new public, which shows how our initial objective- teaching science to a supposedly uninterested public- was accomplished.

Origin

“UNAMirada a la ciencia” came from the desire of a group of journalists of “Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)” to offer new possibilities of approaching the scientific knowledge through readers that hadn’t been contemplated in projects in communication of science in the country.

In 2005 the project was planned as a weekly section in the newspaper “La Prensa”. The objective was to make scientific knowledge popular with journalism. An investigation was made on how science is approached by mexican newspapers. There was a tendency to post news based on international agencies bulletins, and also (but lesser) in reproducing information that came from national institutes. The newspapers dedicated exclusively to science were scarce.

“La Prensa” was among the newspapers that had no science section. This printed media has existed for 86 years. It is one of the most read newspapers in Mexico, with around 300 thousand daily newspapers. It is distributed mainly in “Distrito Federal” and other central states.

A characteristic section of the newspaper “La Prensa” is the police section. It also has a section in politics, sports, international, health, shows and advertisement. According to the newspaper 52% of the readers are men and 48% woman, with ages varying from 26 to 65 years. Middle school is the highest level of school of 68% of them. This level is equivalent to 8 grades of study, which is also the average grade of Mexican population above 15 years.

Since this newspaper is widely accepted and because of the characteristics of their readers, it was proposed to the directives of the newspaper a weekly science section that would occupy a page in the newspaper. The contents and design would be in charge of a team of communicators of UNAM. The newspaper would give the spot without cost for the institution. The collaboration was accepted, and in June 2005 it was published the first number of “UNAMirada a la ciencia” with the headline “*La Prensa y la UNAM presentan el quehacer de los científicos al alcance de nuestros lectores*”. (The newspaper and UNAM present the work of scientists to for our readers).

Characteristics

“UNAMirada a la ciencia” is published every Tuesday in a page in a tabloid format. Its main objective is to bring science closer to an adult public through lecture, and facilitating the comprehension of the scientific activity and its impact in daily life.

According to the “Encuesta Nacional de Lectura”, newspapers occupy the second most read material (42%) in Mexico after books. They are mostly read in “Distrito Federal” and northeast Mexico.¹

The content of “UNAMirada a la ciencia” is representative of the journalistic work oriented to the popularization of science. Raúl Rivadeneira defines journalism as a part of human communication destined to the communication of news. Those news have to be actual, universal (geographical, themes, and social), periodic and of public access.² Journalism, focused on public communication of science, selects, processes and transmits to the non-specialized public in an accessible language news of discoveries, innovations, characters, chronology of facts, and situation, all in a newspaper format.³

“UNAMirada a la ciencia” has a monothematic content that is presented in the genre article, informative note and interview. They make the principal text that occupies around 70% of the page.

This principal text informs about the investigations made in UNAM, an institution that develops a third part of the scientific research in the country in practically all areas of knowledge.

The main source of information are the scientist. This is with the intention of giving a voice to those men and woman dedicated to the science in the “Máxima Casa de Estudios de México”. This way the readers can increase their knowledge on several topics of individual and social impact, while informing themselves and understanding the importance and condition of scientific research.

30% of the content of the page is context data like infographics, figures, and other graphic resources.

In “UNAMirada a la ciencia” several daily life topics are approached, like the exposition to residues at home, the mechanism of formation of rain, the quality of the water, depression, mental health, the origin and how technologies like a microwave work, natural resources. Also social science news are approached.

The text goes with images and an attractive design that allows to differentiate it from the rest of the content of the newspaper. This was made in order for the readers to more easily locate the section.

Results

Readers were allowed to make their opinion known via e—mail or phone. The results indicate that the readers of “La Prensa” are interested in science and its applications. Especially they express interest in what science can do to make their lives better. They say that the content allows them to recognize what the scientists do in a country like Mexico, which poorly invests in science and technology.

From 2005 to May 2014, “UNAMirada a la ciencia” has published 465 numbers every Tuesday in “La Prensa”. This has benefitted the newspaper since it has a section with the support of a university institution.

It has also benefitted UNAM since it has a media to communicate science without paying the newspaper the space. If UNAM had bought this space instead of the collaboration, the institution would have paid around 325 thousand dollars in this 9 years. Another advantage is, since the contents and design of the material are property of UNAM, the section “UNAMirada a la ciencia” is reproduced in 17 newspapers in Mexico.

It is worth noting that the newspaper “La Prensa” includes “UNAMirada a la ciencia” among its best sections. UNAM has included this product in its portal “Toda la UNAM en línea”, where the university’s productions are uploaded to facilitate public access.

Impact growth

“UNAMirada a la ciencia” has transcended other media that have impact on population with a difficult access to products of popularization of science. This public moves in public spaces.

In 2006 an adaptation of the contents published in the newspaper “La Prensa” to a monthly poster was made. This media was chosen because of its exposition potential in public spaces.

Initially the content of the poster “UNAMirada a la ciencia” was the total reproduction of both, the design and the text of a page published in “La Prensa”. This resulted in a very peculiar poster. It didn’t follow the characteristic scheme of this media, which is widely used for advertisements.

It was proposed to use the potential of this media to make popular a theme in science. This required a different handling of information. Currently, the text format is more like a monography, different from the original newspaper format. It is worth noting that, although the poster and the newspaper are different media, “UNAMirada a la ciencia” makes them both reach the same goal: making the comprehension of science easier through reading.

The distributions of the posters “UNAMirada a la ciencia” started in cardboards in the “Sistema Colectivo Metro” (STCM) of Mexico City. This cardboards usually have advertisements and announcements. It is common for people to stop and read those materials while waiting for the “Metro”.

This spaces were proposed with the goal of bringing a more diverse public. The “Metro” operates 12 lines with a total of 195 stations. In a working day more than 4 million people travel the “Metro”.⁴ Numbers from the STCM point out that the users are mainly public and private employees (35%), students (27%), working people (10%), housewives, commerce people, among others (28%). 58% of them are men, 42% are woman.⁵

The public has had a positive response. This motivated to extend the distribution of posters to other spaces. Currently, 22,000 posters are distributed each month in more than 167 places in Mexico City and other states in Mexico, such as stations of “Metrobus” and “Tren Suburbano”, public libraries, government places, schools, non-government organizations, and others.

Readers that spot the poster in any of the spaces mentioned can come to the “Dirección General de Divulgación de la Ciencia” to get the poster they liked. Others come to get the latest edition. Many readers contribute to willingly distribute the posters in spaces they consider optimal to expose this material.

Other way of accessing the posters is an internet download in www.unamiradalaciencia.unam.mx. Also they can register and receive the material via e-mail every month. Currently almost 4,000 people are registered.

Recently a selection of the posters of “UNAMirada a la ciencia” are being exposed in public plazas, an exposition area in the “Metro”, and in several schools.

Challenges

In the near future, “UNAMirada a la ciencia” has several challenges. It is important to have the support of communication media to increase the spaces of the newspaper and poster versions.

On the other hand, the production of the contents and design could incorporate narrative elements and graphic resources that allow to increase the comprehension of the public of science. To give this step, it is necessary to make an evaluation of the impact of the public to have a more precise information, and make the necessary changes. It would also allow us to recognize the uses the readers give to the scientific information they receive.

Currently, this kind of indicators are the readers that communicate via telephone, e-mail and in person.

It is concluded that after 9 years, the experience of “UNAMirada a la ciencia” has been successful in its purpose of getting science to a public that hadn’t been included in a project of communication of science. The team that develops this project is convinced that this kind of information is of interest to the people in Mexico, making it necessary to extend this kind of initiatives.

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