

The “Scientific Temper” and a European Perspective

Essential to science is what Jawaharlal Nehru called “the scientific temper”, the willingness to change previous conclusions in the face of new evidence, the reliance on observed fact and not pre-conceived theory. That temper is essential to humanity’s capacity to confront the contemporary global challenges of ecological breakdown, anthropogenic climate change, the potential and threat of AI, the need for multi-national agreement on nuclear weapons, and the imperative for sustainable development.

The landscape of information and discourse within society has however changed in ways that run counter to these priorities. Digital technologies have enabled revolutionary developments in research but have also fundamentally changed the dynamics of public discourse. At its inception, the expectation was that the internet, and the world wide web that enabled public use of its communication potential, would create a “global village square” that would enliven an interconnected global community in an interactive public space of democratic integration and cooperation enabled by technology. Instead, the outcome has been tribalism. The algorithms used by social media platforms have reinforced existing preoccupations in ways that discourage restraint and create self-insulating bubbles of certainty that undermine social dialogue.

The consequence of these processes has been that the traditional landscape of communication has been crumbling before our eyes because of conspiracy theories, of mis- and dis-information. The latest Global Risk Report of the World Economic Forum identifies the most severe of current risks to be “undermining social cohesion, trust in institutions and fuelling political divides.” These changes have been associated with escalating distrust in science, experts, journalists and universities with the consequence that the ideals of inclusive, intelligent and respectful civic debate as conceived by Nehru seem increasingly distant.

These established trends have been intensified in recent years by changes that have recently culminated with the election of Donald Trump as US President. The rules-based system of the United Nations has been progressively undermined by the re-emergence of nationalist, populist political projects, in so called “illiberal democracies” that prioritise an exclusive definition of the values of the state whilst retaining democratic forms, such as elections, but dispensing with the liberal values that underpin independent institutions to create autocratic democracies. Science (meaning all the disciplines taught in a university) is inherently liberal, and inconsistent with this illiberal trend. The view that “professors are the enemy” combined with the incipient de-funding of science and universities currently taking place in the USA is a trend that could accelerate.

The Management Group of the European International Science Council (ISC) Members Group suggests that this is a critical and urgent moment for ISC’s national members to powerfully reassert the “scientific temper” as of central importance to Europe.

This must not be seen as an elite perspective but an essential part of European heritage and present identity. Advocating and celebrating this should be an overriding priority for the European members of ISC. It is suggested that the European members should pursue this issue as a strategic priority in the next year, working with other European scientific groupings to achieve widespread awareness and persuading the ISC to promote a global response. As part of the Global Voice for Science of the ISC, we should pro-actively respond to ALLEA’s “encouragement to strengthen efforts and committing to actions”. The strategic process summarised overleaf provides a context for a European Members initiative.

*Management Group, European Members of the International Science Council <https://euro-isc.org>
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