Should I say or should I stop: raising your voice to influence science policy

In the current climate of cuts to science and research funding, the commitment of researchers to influencing science policy has resurfaced as an essential issue.

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In 2004, the French scientific movement *Sauvons la Recherche* (Let's Save Research) had a strong and rapid influence on the science policy of the French government. Seven years later, it seems apt to reflect on the results of this campaign and the lessons learned.

The movement began in December 2003 with a handful of Parisian biologists infuriated with the government's lack of financial commitment to science, which would surely mark the destruction of French research. Our first step was to enlarge the movement to all scientific disciplines, and then to find an effective way to get politicians' attention, increase public awareness and even shock public opinion. Thus, at the beginning of 2004, a letter to the government was published online entitled "Silence of the Lambs", containing a veritable threat: that there would be a collective resignation of the laboratory directors who had signed the letter unless there was a national debate on the state of research funding and that the funding voted on by Parliament was actually distributed by the government. The scientific fame of the first signatories gave the petition credibility, and we knew that our threat would be taken seriously if a large majority of laboratory directors joined the cause. A few days later, to the surprise of its initiators, the success of this initiative made the front page of the national daily *Le Monde*. Shortly after, the petition was circulated amongst the public, and on 9 March, the day the 'threat' took effect, the petition had been signed by 75,000 researchers and 250,000 members of the general public. An opinion poll published the same day in the daily newspaper *La Croix*, showed that 82% of the French population supported the movement. The government's response nonetheless remained modest. It wasn't until April and the heavy defeat of the majority party in the regional elections that a reshuffled government heard our demands. Some say that the researchers' movement even affected the election results.

A year later, following a national debate and a report detailing the scientific community's proposals for renovating the research system, Parliament passed a law. Although it included some of the community's proposals, the text was devoid of the original meaning and stripped of their coherence. Had the *Sauvons la Recherche* movement been a better structured and credible lobby, it would have, without any doubt, produced more satisfying results. Seven years later, the assessment of resulting changes to the French research system is mixed. Considerable efforts were made to restructure the research organization, but one can only lament the inability of the French government to simplify a system incomprehensible to outsiders.

For me, the most positive consequence of this campaign is that science is now at the heart of public debate and political discourse. Research and innovation have even become the miracle remedy for averting economic decline! The positioning of scientific research and

political semantics has evolved. Despite a lack of sufficient and coherent support for ambitious science, funding for research and higher education are better off today than other sectors. The French government recently floated a loan for 30 billion euros to finance future investments and stimulate innovation. This masks an often disputable distribution and utilization of overall research funding, leading to financing disparities that might result in a sizeable proportion of high-level laboratories needing to readjust or even cease their activities. However, compared with the situation in Spain or the UK, the worst has been avoided and the biomedical research infrastructure has even been partially consolidated. Although French politicians still do not consider that the development of knowledge — which they systematically reduce to technological innovation — contributes to the collective future of a civilized society, they understand that research contributes to economic development.

Despite this perhaps cynical assessment, I remain convinced that without the major involvement of researchers in 2004, the state of science in France would be even more devastated today. Although each country has specific social dynamics, some of the 'experimental approaches' taken in 2004 by the *Sauvons la Recherche* movement can be universally adopted, their application remaining unique to each culture. To be credible, the scientific community must be organized, whether through scientific societies and associations that predominate in the USA and the UK or as social movements as in France. An enlightened scientist as a government advisor may successfully communicate the views and proposals of the scientific community, but cannot embody them. Using the combined power of the Internet and various social networks — as used by *Sauvons la Recherche* — has proven to be effective in many contexts and provides an essential means of communication for a small community like ours. As researchers, we must never forget that to influence the political sphere, our arguments, as sound and irrefutable as they may be, are not enough. We must first convince society that our issues are their issues. *Sauvons la Recherche* was able to convince associations, scientific societies and academies to support the movement, to meet important economic players, and directly solicit diverse politicians. It was a grassroots movement that, with circumspection, relied on the media to arouse a public response that politicians could not ignore. As scientists, we can and must use our full ingenuity, our personal and collective intelligence, and our enthusiasm for science towards a goal other than publishing an outstanding article in order to defend not our profession, but our faith in the advancement of knowledge.

COMPETING FINANCIAL INTERESTS

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