

16 September 2022

From the General Secretary

Professor Michael Keating

Dear Secretariat of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation

RE: Misinformation and Trusted Voices Call for Evidence

I write to you on behalf of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE), in response to the proposed consultation. We are grateful for the opportunity to respond to this important call for evidence.

As Scotland's National Academy, the RSE has a core mission to use knowledge for public benefit. Over its long history, it has stayed true to this mission by developing a wide range of different initiatives through many channels of communication, constantly adapting to the needs of the day. Most of the RSE's work builds on the expertise of its 1,800 strong network of RSE Fellows, all of whom are leaders in their respective areas.

Unlike many other learned societies, the RSE Fellowship draws on the full spectrum of academic disciplines (e.g., STEM, social sciences, arts and humanities, etc.), as well as seasoned practitioners and thought leaders from public service, industry, culture, and beyond. This gives the RSE a particular strength, in being able to mobilise a diverse Fellowship spanning the disciplines, to bring together a wide range of informed perspectives on any topic.

The RSE works as an independent, non-partisan, and evidence-based organisation. It is funded through a number of sources, with the largest share of funding provided by the Scottish Funding Council.¹ In its work, the Academy both responds to ongoing wider trends, and initiates debate and discussion on emerging matters of national relevance.

The RSE, like other organisations, operates in a complex media environment, where previous models and channels of communication are changing day by day. To fulfil its mission, the RSE is constantly adjusting to use the best ways to communicate available evidence through different types of engagement to reach a diverse audience. Staying true to its mission of 'making knowledge useful', the Academy is a resource and an asset both for Scotland and more widely.

¹ A breakdown of funding sources is available on the [RSE website](https://www.rse.org.uk).



The knowledge that the Academy builds on results not only from the academic research of Fellows but also from the practice and experience of those Fellows from outside academia, making the RSE uniquely placed to consider and integrate a diversity of perspectives from a range of leading minds. Inherent to this comprehensive knowledge-base is a recognition that scientific evidence is constantly evolving and is not without its limitations and uncertainties. The RSE, therefore, seeks to present a balanced, holistic, and fair account of the available evidence to inform decision-making and public opinion.

In what follows, we will provide examples of RSE activities and programmes that have reached different communities in Scotland, the UK and beyond, and are founded on the responsible use and communication of data and evidence.

Research Awards Programme – Impact beyond the Academy

Through its broad research awards programme, the RSE supports the development of high-quality academic research and public engagement activities to advance scientific knowledge on a wide range of topics, covering the full spectrum of academic disciplines. The compounded collective impact of these projects, many of which include public engagement activities, is considerable. Impact has been enhanced through the revised programme, launched in May 2021, due to widened eligibility across all disciplines, all career stages and all universities, enabling awardees to generate outcomes that cross disciplinary, sectoral and geographic boundaries.

Public Engagement with Science through Off- and Online Events

The RSE has substantial experience of convening and developing public-facing events, with a year-round programme of public engagement which includes high-profile lectures, panel discussions and roundtables bringing together a wide range of perspectives from the RSE Fellowship and guests to reflect on contemporary topics. Some of these events have explicitly focused on the communication of scientific information, such as a 2021 event titled *Conspiracies, fake news and false scientific information*.² Many of our events are now recorded to expand both our reach and our library of virtual resources.

The RSE reaches diverse audiences, and these are not limited to adults. Through its public engagement programme, RSE Fellows regularly deliver talks in schools to enthuse and inspire young people from primary and secondary schools on different topics. One recent example would be the *Shetland Space Series*, a programme of talks in local primary schools which gave children an opportunity to learn more about space and engage with some of the country's top astronomy and science experts. These events present opportunities for learners to critically reflect on the nature of scientific knowledge and inquiry.

The RSE's summer public engagement festival, *Curious*, held yearly in August, represents an excellent example of our efforts to communicate knowledge in different forms, and to improve the scientific literacy of the general population. In recent years, partially in response to the Covid crisis and our ongoing commitment to reaching new audiences, Curious events are now delivered in a wide variety of formats, in person, online or hybrid, as talks, panel discussions or practical workshops. While the formats and types of delivery differ, what unites our Curious events is the aim of communicating knowledge on different topics to the general public in an accessible and engaging way in order to inspire further discovery. The themes for 2022 were health and

² [Conspiracies, fake news and false scientific information](#)



wellbeing, innovation and invention, our planet, and the Year of Stories, and the range of events included are available on a dedicated website.³

Facilitating Public Engagement with Science through Traditional and New Media

Our distinguished Fellows often feature in traditional media, such as TV and radio, presenting informed opinions on different topics of contemporary relevance. An increasingly wide range of Fellows also make use online channels for communicating ideas such as TED talks or podcasts. During the pandemic, RSE Fellows regularly appeared in the media, providing information on topics such as public health or behavioural science to support the public's understanding of the situation and encourage people to make more informed decisions.

The RSE also has a dedicated fortnightly column in one of the leading national newspapers, The Scotsman, named *Inside Science*. These articles, by-lined by one or several Fellows of the RSE, present an opportunity to communicate scientific ideas to the newspaper readership.⁴

Post-Covid-19 Futures Commission – Reaching Diverse Audiences through Multiple Channels

In response to the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis and mindful of the wide-ranging implications of the pandemic for years to come, the RSE proactively set up the Post-Covid-19 Futures Commission to quickly respond to the evolving situation and to prepare for the aftermath of the crisis. This inquiry brought together leading thinkers and practitioners from different sectors and backgrounds to reflect on lessons learned during the rapidly-changing pandemic to support a better future. The Commission set out to promote dialogue and to encourage engagement - informed by evidence, expertise and experience - to learn from the lessons of the pandemic and to co-develop new ways of thinking.

The activity was separated into different strands, with two of these perhaps most relevant to the ongoing call for evidence, e.g., Data, Evidence & Science and Public Debate & Participation. These work strands sought to explore how science literacy is engendered within a society, and the most effective methods of engaging citizens in national discourse and decision-making. The Data, Evidence & Science workstream's outputs reflected on the complex role of scientific evidence and how this should be communicated to the general public to be effective, providing a useful blueprint for scientific engagement with current debates.⁵

The Commission's work included a significant public dimension, with a range of types of public-facing activities and outputs developed during its operation. Innovative public event concepts were also trialed, including the RSE's first online *Hack* on the theme of fake news. Some reflections on this successful and impactful event are available on the Commission's dedicated website.⁶ Other events were focused on the communication of scientific knowledge, such as *Following the Science: How are data and evidence used and communicated*⁷. The Post-Covid-19 Commission made use of different media to reach different audiences, including videos, podcasts, and blogs/articles. Through their work, the working groups reached diverse audiences, from scientists to policymakers, media specialists or young people. The Commission also had

³ [RSE Curious website](#)

⁴ A recent example is an article focused on [quantum physics](#).

⁵ See for instance: [Scotland needs an independent fact-checking service to ensure science is not being misrepresented](#), [Digital communications during the pandemic](#), [The challenges of advising on a pandemic](#), [The pandemic and the media](#)

⁶ [The virtual Hack](#)

⁷ [Following the science – how are data and evidence used and communicated](#)



significant national media coverage, including reflections from RSE commissioners on the use and perceptions of data and evidence.⁸

Young Academy – Shaping Public Debate

The RSE's *Young Academy* programme represents another dynamic sector of RSE work. Bringing together the expertise of young professionals from different sectors, the Young Academy delivers a progressive programme of events and activities that respond to pressing challenges and encourage informed discussion. One of the Young Academy's flagship projects has been its *Charter for Responsible Debate*⁹. The Charter is intended to improve the culture and quality of public debate, recognising that misinformation compromises the quality of discourse. As such, one of its nine underlying tenets is: "Aim for accuracy, and base your contributions on evidence and experience." The Charter was published alongside a series of exercises to prompt readers to consider how its principles can be applied to their own interactions. The Young Academy's programmes also make use of different channels, from in-person and online events, to podcasts and live-streamed Twitter sessions communicating scientific knowledge.¹⁰

Science and the Law – Impact in the Judicial Sector

In partnership with the Royal Society and senior members of the judiciary, the RSE has developed the Science and the Law programme since 2014. Working with leading scientists and forensic science practitioners, the two Societies have prepared a set of primers for judiciary and legal professionals that facilitate the handling of scientific evidence in courts. These documents provide accurate representations of the evidence available on specific topics (e.g. forensic anthropology, ballistics, etc), thus assisting the judiciary in their decision-making. The primers provide an excellent example of RSE communicating trustworthy scientific evidence to a specific audience.¹¹

Engaging with the Business Community

For many years, the RSE ran a successful initiative linking academia with the business community: the *RSE Enterprise Fellowships*. The project has offered budding and more established entrepreneurs from the higher education sector a leading business development and training programme to accelerate their business growth and extend their reach. The project has not only had a significant impact on the businesses that were funded, but it has also had wider economic and social impacts in many sectors and created more than 2.500 jobs across the UK. A series of success stories from alumni are available on the RSE website.¹²

Engaging with Policy-makers

Through the policy team's work, the RSE regularly contributes to policy-making processes. Facilitated by policy team members, RSE Fellows regularly inform and influence policy processes at Scottish and UK level. This is done through a range of activities and programmes, including responding to consultations such as this one, providing oral evidence to parliamentary committee meetings, holding investigative roundtables and events, and running major inquiries.¹³ By presenting balanced, neutral and carefully considered expert advice, the RSE has

⁸ [How do we provide confidence in using data, evidence and science?](#)

⁹ [The Charter for Responsible Debate](#)

¹⁰ [Young Academy of Scotland website](#)

¹¹ [Science and the Law page](#)

¹² [RSE Enterprise Fellowships](#)

¹³ The RSE's policy page provides an overview of recent [briefing papers and event summaries](#).



established itself as a regular contributor and trusted voice in policy-making at the Scottish and UK level.

Collaborating with other Academies

Lastly, the RSE works in partnership with the Learned Society of Wales and the Royal Irish Academy through the Celtic Academies Alliance, thus pooling the expertise of these national academies to provide a unified and authoritative voice on matters relevant to the devolved nations. More information about the Alliance is available online.¹⁴

These are just some selected examples from the RSE's wide range of activities and programmes. As we move forward, the Society will continue to fulfil its mission of making knowledge useful while carefully considering how it is communicated. Mobilising its Fellowship across a range of dynamic and innovative activities, it will continue to provide benefit for Scotland and the UK and make an impact as an authoritative institution reaching different audiences both offline and online. We hope this evidence will be helpful for your enquiry and we are happy to provide more detailed information as required. We look forward to seeing the results of this exercise.

Best wishes,

Prof Michael Keating



¹⁴ [Celtic Academies Alliance](#)

