

Report of the Dialogue Sessions “Cafés Mimir Andino”

“Communicating research, university and public opinion”

Virtual Forum co-organised by ASCUN, OBREAL GLOBAL and the EU-LAC FOUNDATION

29 June 2021

Time: 08:00 am (Colombia time) // 15:00 CEST

Agenda



**Conversatorios
Cafés Mimir Andino**

Comunicar la investigación: universidad y opinión pública

Dra. Soledad Álvarez Velasco
Investigadora posdoctoral
University of Houston,
College of Liberal
Arts and Social Sciences,
Faculty of Comparative
Cultural Studies

Dr. Mario Martín Pecheny
Vicepresidente de Asuntos
Científicos Consejo Nacional
de Investigaciones Científicas
y Técnicas, Argentina

Modera:
Dr. Alfonso Marzal
Profesor Titular Departamento de Zoología
Universidad de Extremadura, España

29 de junio de 2021 | 8:00 COT - 15:00 CEST

Transmisión: www.youtube.com/AsociacionColombianadeUniversidades
Zoom Registro: <http://bit.ly/CafésMimirAndino2>

The Dialogue sessions “Cafés Mimir Andino”

From June to August 2021, the European Union-Latin America and the Caribbean International Foundation (EU-LAC Foundation), OBREAL Global Observatory (OBREAL Global) and the Colombian Association of Universities (ASCUN) jointly organised the **“Cafés Mimir Andino: Strategies to promote research and innovation in universities”**.

The virtual dialogue series was designed to serve the project’s partner universities and especially their research leadership. The objectives of this activity were:



- Exchange ideas about the implementation of research management and the model developed in the framework of the Mimir Andino Project;
- To offer a space for networking among leaders in research management;
- Promote bi-regional and international dialogue, relating the themes of the dialogues to different political, economic and social contexts.

Each session featured one or two experts from Europe and/or Latin America who shared reflections and examples on a specific topic; a research and innovation management leader associated with the Mimir Andino Project moderated the space and addressed questions to the expert(s); a group of rectors and vice-rectors from Andean Universities attended the dialogue and were invited to share ideas and experiences, and articulate additional questions to the guest expert.

Initial Statements

Dr Soledad Álvarez Velasco, Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Houston, USA

Dr Álvarez Velasco began her intervention with a reflection: digital platforms and media have consolidated into an innovative interdisciplinary field, and currently allow the social sciences and computer sciences to converge and generate new pedagogical visualisations that enrich the teaching and research process, as well as the dissemination and communication process. The (In)Mobility in the Americas and Covid-19 project - which Soledad Álvarez Velasco co-coordinates, highlights the enormous digital gap that exists in the region, and the need to use new tools to communicate research projects. From her perspective, digital networks become key elements for research, and instruments such as digital ethnographies can be of great help for the dissemination of knowledge. Examples: Map of migrants recounting their experiences throughout the pandemic; Conversations at the regional level, which aim to disseminate the networks.

Dr Mario Martín Pecheny, Vice-President for Scientific Issues, National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), Argentina

In his opening statement, Dr Pecheny outlined that one of the functions of using digital media today is that it allows to explain to larger audiences what the research process itself is like, to showcase the people doing the research, and to communicate to the public and also to public opinion professionals - journalists, decision-makers and politicians - the results of the research. At the end of the day, this also ends up influencing research budgets.



On the other hand, it cannot be ignored that there are challenges in terms of languages and formats. And this is because there are different times between previous generations, who were trained to read and write, and the current ones who are faster, and assimilate digital content better.

Additionally, another challenge for scientific producers is not to create categories in digital media that may be susceptible to stigma and persecution. The challenge is the assessment of problems, and the evaluation of public policies that is done from the academy, and here is when one can notice that the dialogues, as well as the language, between decision makers and researchers, is different, and some fail to understand each other.

For researchers, communication joins other professional challenges, such as participating in ethics committees, assessing, submitting to evaluation committees, applying for resources, in addition to the tasks of communicating and disseminating. This is an overload of responsibilities, and universities often do not cover it or take it into account.

Questions and dialogue with the moderator Dr Alfonso Marzal, Senior Scientist and Associate Professor of the Department of Zoology, University of Extremadura, Spain

In these times of health and economic crisis, society has turned to researchers and science to find solutions to problems. Do you think that public opinion about scientific work has changed because of Covid-19?

To answer this question, Soledad Álvarez Velasco, reviewed the results of the "Wellcome Global Monitor 2018", an instrument that for the first time took a look at this type of perceptions, and that collected information before the pandemic. One of the results is that in societies that are economically inequitable, there is a lower trust in scientific work. This is explained by the fact that, in these societies, scientists do not participate in the spaces consumed by the majority of the population, - a situation that is different from other regions of the global north, where scientists participate in various areas of daily life. This translates into a great challenge for Latin America. Faced with the effects of the pandemic, there is still no global survey of a similar nature. What does exist is a study conducted by the *Pew Research Center*, which focused on northern countries. But this has not been replicated in countries of the global south.

Before the pandemic there was not such a high esteem of science, and it has to do with factors associated with inequality, and the public role that scientists have in our societies. On the other hand, the role of the media is crucial to give relevance to scientific findings. Nowadays, however, there are very few cases in which the media use scientific data for certain debates, and this also has an impact on the education of societies.



According to Mario Pecheny, it is necessary to put the importance of research, infrastructure and resources at the centre of the social and political agenda. These issues had not been prioritised, but the pandemic has shown the importance of having scientific knowledge as a basis for improving all aspects of life. In LAC countries, and particularly in Argentina, there is still a logic of immediacy, created around the idea of immediacy. A survey conducted at the University of San Andrés showed that scientists were valued as a more prestigious profession. However, throughout the pandemic, this valorisation has also turned into attacks, because scientists are the ones who provide decision-makers with relevant data and evidence on the pandemic, and consequently, this has made them a target of criticism, even though they are not precisely the ones who delimit policy measures.

At the end of the day, it happens that scientists, when understood as someone who develops their analysis based on procedures and methods, is stigmatised in a kind of plot that denotes their superiority. This is added to the culture of social networks, which calls for immediacy, forcing actors to generate immediate responses to the pandemic. On the other hand, there is an irrational discourse claiming that people shall not be governed by rules dictated by people who are in a position of privilege - as is the case of scientists.

What strategies do you think should be followed between research and public opinion to counteract the effects of “fake news”?

Mario Pecheny responded that “fake news”, in addition to being a problem for democracies, is also harmful because it allows the circulation of fallacies and the pointing out of possible perpetrators. In addition, there are opinion leaders who sometimes say one thing and the next day change their position, but this, in most cases, affects their legitimacy. And therefore, the problem of “fake news” is a problem of societies that goes beyond the scientific field. The dangerous thing is that “fake news” involves the political class and political institutions as a whole, involves multiple institutions, and it poses a risk for coexistence, pushing for a certain version of a “truth” of things to be imposed, thereby opening up for outbreaks of violence of containment and repression that end up being justified among partial audiences.

Regarding the strategies to be used, Soledad Álvarez Velasco said that it is necessary to generate synergies with multiple institutions to produce counter-narratives capable of generating evidence. This, therefore, is a task for universities and researchers. Alliances, in this sense, in the digital world should try to develop or visualize alternative narratives, and join diverse actors and society groups, such as magazines, museums, researchers, and independent media, capable of showing arguments and informed spheres to transform the coexistence among us. It is necessary to unbalance what we want to question, to develop a critical and political role that should generate in the university and research in such a complex moment as the one we live in now.



From the experience that you have between university/society, the communication of research towards society, to be sure of certain aspects, is there any other example that you have developed in your work centres?

From CONICET Argentina - the institution where Mario Pecheny works - all activities related to science communication, writing articles, liaison or technology transfer are valued. Additionally, we have to start recognising more the research systems. CONICET created a centre known as “*Tecnópolis*”, a place where there are activities related to science/technology, and where, before the pandemic, through culture, for example, these were attended by tens of thousands of students who were interested in being closely linked to science, and this, for example, is a strategy to bring science closer to the new generations.

Soledad Álvarez Velasco added that the work in the territory undertaken by anthropologists and sociologists is another way to generate a link between society and science, as there is a permanent communication and co-production of knowledge, that is revealed in the final result, - a territorial insertion.

In addition, intergenerational transmission is key, and peer-to-peer communication in public opinion is still a pending debt among scientists, but also as an institution. However, it also deserves policy and resources.

Another important aspect is the transforming social role of the university, which has traditionally been oriented towards a process of dissemination through extremely exclusive channels, such as books, articles and seminars. If it is going to continue in this way, it is not achieving the effect that the university should generate, and above all the creation of a critical public that understands the realities and demands. Therefore, communication channels must be opened that show solutions to everyday problems through research.

Soledad Álvarez also referred to the *(In)Mobility* Project as a great experience in the use of digital networks, which has made it possible to build knowledge around the situation of migrants, and thus to produce counter-narratives. This, for example, is a free access platform, and it does not constitute a costly exercise. In this sense, it is also necessary to generate differentiated communication strategies and different channels of communication. Another interesting example is the *Feral-Atlas* project at Stanford University, which measures the economic and political impacts of the Anthropocene. In this type of project, for example, visualisations and digital cartographies are developed, and the findings of these projects can be used by teachers, researchers and the general public. The result of the project is that the information has been weaved into a process of mass dissemination.

Another example is “*The Project 1619*”, - a partnership between a researcher and the *New York Times*. It is a project composed of audiovisual material, videos, and podcasts that reconstruct the history of the legacy of slavery in the United States. It is based on scientific research that is then disseminated massively, via a partnership, and in different languages. This project also shows the importance



of building synergies with other actors, and the role of the university in its task of disseminating scientific knowledge that transcends academic boundaries.

On the one hand, there is the interest of showing the receiving community the value of what we do as scientists. On the other hand, teachers often don't see value in what we do either. How do they think, and how can we make the receiver perceive the information we are giving them, and how can we make the decision-maker appreciate it too?

In this regard, Mario Pecheny responded that evidence-based policy is in trend. However, it should be kept in mind that the “timing” of research is one, and that of public policy is another. In the context of the pandemic, for example, it has even been a matter of hours and/or days. That is why there is a problem of rhythms and a gap between the production and dissemination of knowledge, because while the university can take months or years to produce a result, policy and decision-makers have to respond immediately.

Another challenge is to recognise the value of basic research, and this is much more difficult to understand because there is no information with applications if it does not go through basic information. It is a capital that, at the time of a crisis, is decisive for the progress of science and for the life of societies.

For her part, Soledad Álvarez indicated that the challenge for researchers is based on how to show the evidence and how to proceed with the dissemination of information. Nowadays, communication goes beyond the website, where only the vision and mission of a project can be shown. However, that this information is transformed into a digital project and that the language used communicates to all audiences should be the applied strategy of research projects today. Today, there is a whole generation of digitalised young people who understand social science results in virtual spaces. And therefore, the democratisation of these digital strategies could communicate more effectively what we have achieved.

Finally, we must occupy public spaces in alliances with the media and disseminate what we are working on, via podcasts, interviews, continuous spaces in the press, and thus occupy a space for education and participation in public debate on an ongoing basis. It is necessary to make alliances with the upcoming generations, who are capable of understanding content in a more creative and fearless approach.

Information about the Mimir Andino Project

With a duration of 4 years (2018-2022), the Mimir Andino Project is primarily designed to assist and encourage partner universities in South American (and specifically Andean) countries to better understand the status quo of their research management approaches, from performance and evaluation to management structures and effectiveness.



The project provides universities with a research management model that helps them achieve their research and innovation objectives with respect to national and regional development. Consequently, the partner universities share experiences in order to build and strengthen capacities on the organisation and management of innovation and research, and understand their current models, principles and standards. Knowledge transfer is also key among the South American partners, who share common geographical, economic and scientific interests and are eager to deepen their regional cooperation and integration in higher education and research.

Links of interest

Video of the Webinar in Spanish: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RjQnfBpL8SI&t=200s>

Project (IN)MOBILITY: <https://www.inmovilidadamericas.org/>

Wellcome Global Monitor 2018: <https://wellcome.org/reports/wellcome-global-monitor/2018>

Pew Research Center 2020: Science and Scientists Held in High Esteem Across Global Publics
file:///Users/office29/Downloads/PS_2020.09.29_global-science_REPORT.pdf

Tecnópolis Platform (Argentina): <https://tecnopolis.gob.ar/>

Feral Atlas: <https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/>

Project 1961: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/02/12/magazine/1619-project-slave-auction-sites.html>

This webinar was organised in the framework of the activities of the Mimir Andino Project (<http://mimirandino.org/>).

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