

How scientific evidence can be a powerful tool for insight, accountability and change

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Credit: SenseAboutScience.org

The organisation [Sense about Science](http://SenseAboutScience.org) advocates for openness and honesty about research, and works to ensure that the importance of sound science and evidence is recognised in public debates and policymaking.

[Valentin Partula](#), Ph.D. student at the Center for Interdisciplinary

Research (CRI), and [Sofie Vanthournout](#), director of Sense about Science EU, were interviewed by Maria Molina-Calavita, scientific coordinator at the CRI.

Maria Molina-Calavita: Could you introduce yourself in a few words?

Valentin Partula: I'm currently a second-year Ph.D. candidate at University of Paris-Diderot and I'm enrolled in the interdisciplinary ["Frontières du Vivant" Ph.D. program](#) at the CRI. I'm working in the nutritional epidemiology research team. Our main research goal is to study the relationships between nutrition and health at the populational level. My Ph.D. project focuses on studying the associations between nutrition and dietary intake, gut-microbiota composition and the functioning of the immune system.

Sofie Vanthournout: By training I'm a plant physiologist, but during the last decade or so I've been working on connecting science to policy. I used to work for European networks of science academies that give advice to European institutions, but felt there was something missing – and it was the public debate. When you get responses like "Oh, we know what scientists are saying about GMOs but the public opinion is so strong that we can't just ignore it", you realise that communication between scientists and policymakers is not enough. Then I discovered [Sense about Science](#) (SaS), an organisation that has existed for 15 years in the UK – they stand up for science in the public debate. I thought, "This is the missing part". They wanted to set up something in Europe and I was immediately enthusiastic. In Brussels, what we do is monitor the use and abuse of [scientific evidence](#) in public life. We don't do it for the interest of the researchers but in the public interest. We advocate for openness about the evidence behind important claims, we equip people to ask for and understand evidence.

Maria: I understand that SaS is an independent charity that challenges the misrepresentation of science and evidence in public life. What are its principal activities and achievements?

Sofie: We want to be a catalyser rather than doing things ourselves, so we don't do myth-busting or fact-checking – there are others that can do that. Instead, we try to create systemic change. I can give the example of three campaigns we are doing in Europe.

The first is a public campaign called ["Ask for Evidence"](#). We all come across products that claim they'll be good for your health or that they'll make your hair grow better or your child sleep better or whatever. Very often, people don't know what to believe. Well, a good way to find out is to *ask for the evidence* and that's actually something that everybody can do. We encourage people to ask for evidence, we help them phrase the question, and also help them to understand the evidence that they get back. We explain things like peer-review clinical trials, systematic review, etc. and if necessary, we put them in contact with a scientist.

We're also very much concerned about the whole "post truth" discussion – the idea that people don't care about experts, don't care about facts and evidence and scientific research. Based on what we experience on a daily basis, that is not true. We meet loads of people, non-researchers, who are concerned about facts, expertise and evidence. We thought we should give these people a voice – we brought several of them to the European Parliament. We had, for instance, a Dutch farmer, Swiss cook, Danish hunter and Bulgarian surfer, and they all came to the European Parliament to bring the same message: "We care about evidence and we want politicians to use evidence". The result was the ["Evidence Matters" campaign](#).

And if you want the people to have access to evidence and science, you need scientists to communicate well about their evidence, and to be present in the public debates as well. We've set up a network of early career researchers which is called "[Voice of Young Science](#)". We train early career research, as we equip them and we motivate them to stand up for science in public debates: to take responsibility and to be present with good evidence and with a rational and objective approach.

Maria: Could you tell us more about Voice of Young Science network?

Valentin: I first met Sophie when she came to the CRI to present Sense about Science. As a career perspective, I'd like to get involved in scientific affairs – more precisely working in how scientific evidence can be used to back up claims. I thought the work that she was doing at Sense about Science was very interesting. After her introductory course at the CRI, we had the opportunity to apply for a one-day workshop in Brussels, and I was accepted. It was divided in three panels: first, we were introduced with scientists who had been facing the press, the public or politicians throughout their career. Then we met EU representatives and politicians speaking about their experience working with scientists and science in general.

Finally, we had the opportunity to speak with journalists working in the reporting of science. It was very exciting to get the three points view – it helped us deconstruct the stereotypes that we might have. To me, the most interesting panel was the journalists, because as scientists we sometimes feel that journalists can distort scientific facts to make their articles or news more appealing for the public. One of the journalists was a scientist by training and told us that in her line of work she reads the scientific publications, the evidence and double-checks everything. That was comforting to hear, that serious work is being done when reporting [science](#) and explaining it to the public.

Maria: Why do you think is important to get involved in this kind of activities?

Valentin: I think that the "Voice of Young Science" network helps young scientists to become empowered – first of all, it gets them out of the lab! Science today isn't just a matter of doing research, it's also knowing how to communicate it. You can be great scientist but if you don't know how to share your research and take the next steps to achieve your goal, it's not enough. Being able to take part in "Voice of Young Science" network and being given the tools to become – I would like to call it – scientist 2.0, was very enlightening for me.

Maria: If I'm a young researcher, how can I participate to Voice of Young Science?

Sofie: You can just [sign up for free for the network on our website](#). It's for all early-career researchers, whether you're a natural scientist, social scientist, historian or whatever. Any researcher can join. You'll get invitations for workshops and trainings and the network also organises public-engagement campaigns once or twice a year. Any member of the network can launch a new idea, and when there's enough support and motivated people, we will get around the table and start a public campaign. For instance, we've had campaigns about homeopathy, "detox" products, glyphosate. The network really dares to tackle very difficult topics.

The network has been growing spontaneously. A lot of our participants feel a bit isolated and are keen to engage with the public. They don't get support from their lab supervisors or universities, and many of their colleagues are not interested in these topics. It was really heartening and motivating for these people to meets others like them, those who want to invest time in public engagement. They stayed in touch and

spontaneously started teaming up to do larger campaigns.

Maria: As a Ph.D student, Valentin, what would your advice be for other young researchers if they want to join this network?

Valentin: First of all, they can sign up for the newsletter. For those interested in public engagement, they can contact members of the network and I am sure that any member receiving a request for more information would be willing to answer. For instance, if I get an e-mail saying: "I'm interested in nutritional or food product claims, or nutrition in general, could you please tell me more about it?", I would gladly give a feedback on my experience, on what I know. The strength of the network is to have motivated people who are really willing to engage with others, to make the network grow and together have a stronger voice.

Maria: What are the perspectives for SaS in Europe?

Sofie: We are still working on our ["Evidence Matters" campaign](#). We've started with the kick-off event in the Parliament, and we plan to ensure that the message is heard. Anybody who wants to strengthen this message should write to their representatives in the European Parliament and say that they care about evidence. We will make sure that all of the members of the European Parliament will get emails from their voters, from their citizens who say "Please take into account the evidence".

We're going to check whether they are doing a good job, we're going to name and shame any member of the European Parliament that does not reply to questions from citizens about evidence or that ignores evidence or misrepresents [evidence](#) in their communications. We will report about that so we'll make an overview of the best and the worst practices. We

are also planning to set up some partnerships with local organisations across Europe who can then run that campaign at a local level and communicate with people in their own language and with their own ways of communication.

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