

Written evidence submitted by Mr Jeremy Stevenson (COM0107)

I have been invited to make a submission to the Science and Technology Committee by the UK Parliament Outreach and Engagement Service. I'm not sure why I have been selected other than as a 'random' member of the public. Having said that I am quite happy to share my thoughts with you.

I'm 72 and retired. I have a degree in Physics obtained through what was then known as a sandwich course. Six months in work and six months full time study at the location of the educational body for a period of three years. I was paid a salary by my employer throughout the whole period. I think this type of educational opportunity no longer exists and I feel incredibly fortunate to have been able to benefit from it.

After graduation I continued to work for my employer involved for many years in the technical control of the manufacture of photographic film and paper.

I have maintained an interest in scientific and technical matters throughout my career and to the present day.

Science and technology reporting in the media.

Causal relationships between events are often implied when there are no such proven relationships. I think the most recent was the proposition that earthquakes were more prevalent during the Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn planetary alignment earlier this year. I call this kind of thing 'sloppy' science and in my view such abuse is frequent in reporting, especially of medical matters. I'm not sure if this is the fault of the scientists themselves or the lack rigour or understanding of the media.

Scientists and Technologists are still frequently portrayed as nerdy, emotionally stunted (often male) and uncaring. Brian Cox and Dara O'Briain (among others) are doing their best to correct this image.

Large global scientific companies are regarded as intrinsically evil: witness the reputation of Monsanto, and the conglomerates known as Big Pharma.

I recently read a book about abuses in the food processing industry and whilst I don't necessarily believe everything is sweetness and light in that area some of the language used was irrational. Emulsions were described as 'unwilling and unnatural' partnerships of oil and water which does a great disservice to mayonnaise.

STEM education

Attracting youngsters into STEM education is vital to our future. I am saddened but not surprised that so many choose softer disciplines. It is good that coding seems to be popular thanks to youngster's involvement with phones, gaming, tablets and computers. This is a good thing in my view.

Not sure how to do it but jobs in science and technology probably don't seem to be as attractive as the possibilities (however remote) of careers in the media or sport.

Science in Parliament

I may be wrong but very few of our elected representatives appear to have been educated or employed in STEM environments. Much of decision making these days needs at least a basic understanding of maths and science concepts. For instance climate change, statistical analysis of population trends, economic models and transportation. Lack of competence is a worry as far as the quality of decision making might be.

Thank you for the chance to comment.

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