A JOURNAL BY SISSA MEDIALAB

ESSAY

Towards a *terroir* approach to science communication and its evidencing

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Abstract

This essay proposes *terroir* as a metaphor for rethinking science communication. In contrast to dominant calls for a science of science communication, grounded in broadly replicable and generalisable methods, we suggest that communication practices are fundamentally shaped by the particularities of place, people, histories, and more-than-human relations. Drawing on the agricultural origins of terroir, we argue that good science communication is not about imposing control but about cultivating resonance within specific ecosystems of meaning. This perspective also invites us to recognise the value of intuitive knowledge, local practice, and arts-based methods, which are often excluded from dominant frameworks. As part of the research programme *Addressing Sustainability with Arts-Based Science Communication*, we explore co-creative, arts-based approaches that surface emotional, sensory, and contextual dimensions of sustainability science communication. Ultimately, we call for a shift: from the search for universal best practices to the careful, situated crafting of an *arts* of science communication.

Keywords

Science communication: theory and models

Received: 13th May 2025
Accepted: 4th November 2025
Published: 17th December 2025

In the maturation of science communication as a research field, calls have emerged for a better evidence base for both research and practice [Fischhoff & Scheufele, 2013; Jensen & Gerber, 2020]. These calls are based in part on a refutation of 'intuitive theories and anecdotal observations' [Fischhoff & Scheufele, 2013, p. 14031], and have given rise to what has been designated as the science of science communication, namely an 'empirical approach to defining and understanding audiences, designing messages, mapping communication landscapes, and — most important — evaluating the effectiveness of communication efforts' [Kahan et al., 2017, p. 1]. This phrasing invokes the scientific method, i.e., systematic observation and experimentation, inductive and deductive reasoning, and the formation and testing of hypotheses and theories [cf. Andersen & Hepburn, 2015], to produce evidence that is replicable, theory driven, and generalisable [Kahan et al., 2017]. It thus resonates strongly with Merton's [1942] CUDOS model, in which science is presumed to generate knowledge that is universally applicable and 'true'. The application of the ethos of the scientific method to science communication research — an application likely inspired by the roots of science communication in the natural sciences [cf. Takach, 2016] — thus suggests that science communication is a phenomenon that can be analytically broken down into its component parts and understood, controlled, and experimentally manipulated.

We applaud efforts to systematise observations and generate theory, and we certainly agree that science communication should utilise insights from research [cf. Jensen & Gerber, 2020]. Even so, we wonder whether attempts to understand science communication using an experimental paradigm (i.e. controlling variables, using pre-established procedures, starting from similar assumptions) are doomed to fail, or, at least, to offer limited explanatory power. This is because the pursuit of generic best practices risks flattening the inherently diverse and context-dependent nature of science communication, potentially obscuring critical differences in how scientific knowledge is locally interpreted and enacted. In other words, what is lacking from positivist and post-positivist experimental approaches is a sensitivity to the complexity of the sociocultural, institutional, disciplinary, political, pedagogical, and discursive contexts science communication takes place in, and which condition and constrain how science is represented, framed, experienced, and ultimately understood [Achiam & Marandino, 2014]. Accordingly, instead of looking for widely generalisable 'gold standards' for science communication, the goal should be to understand how participants in science communication create localised meanings, based on their experiences, culture, and context.

In a separate development that runs parallel to the unfolding of the 'science of science communication', metaphors related to ecology have appeared in the science communication research literature. For instance, Davies and Horst [2016] describe the heterogeneity and multiplicity of science communication within contemporary knowledge societies in terms of an ecosystem. They employ this metaphor…

> …not to imagine a stable structure in which everything has a particular place and is connected in very specific ways, but to signify a space teeming with different life forms, all relating to each other in different ways. If science communication is an ecosystem, it has many niches in which different practices of communication sustain themselves and others in a complex web of interdependence and autonomy [Davies & Horst, 2016, p. 6].

The ecosystem metaphor draws explicitly on the irreducible complexity and interconnectedness of natural systems, suggesting that science communication as culture cannot be fully understood through isolated variables or linear cause and effect relationships. Instead, much like natural ecosystems, science communication as culture consists of diverse, interdependent practices and actors, each responding and adapting to their immediate contexts and neighbouring 'species'. This perspective resonates with the conceptualisation of a 'knowledge ecosystem' discussed by Nicolaisen et al. [2021], where scientific knowledge itself is always embedded in — and shaped by — its societal, cultural, institutional, disciplinary (etc.) surroundings. When knowledge is transposed from one setting to another, for instance through science communication initiatives, it is inevitably reshaped by the distinctive features of its new surroundings, underscoring how context-dependent and relational the meanings constructed through science communication truly are. As an alternative or addition to seeing the field of science communication *as* an ecosystem, this essay suggests we see instances of science communication as *taking place in* local ecosystems.

We suggest that the ecosystem and ecology-related metaphors extend beyond descriptive uses: they have deeper epistemic ramifications. Sterling [2004], writing about science education, identifies an 'emergent postmodern ecological paradigm characterised by a shift from reductionism toward holism, from objectivism toward critical subjectivity, and from relativism toward relationalism' [p. 51]. In other words, rather than viewing knowledge as objective, independent 'facts', this approach sees knowledge as emerging through relationships and interactions — embedded within specific contexts and interpretive frameworks. Adopting this ecological perspective within science communication prompts us to fundamentally rethink our epistemological assumptions: it challenges researchers and practitioners alike to move beyond the mechanistic pursuit of universally applicable 'best practices' and toward a more nuanced recognition of interconnectedness, complexity, and context-dependency.

Furthermore, embracing the ecosystem metaphor requires moving away from declarations of what constitutes superior communication. Instead, it invites critical reflection about how particular communication practices emerge from — and respond to — complex configurations of technical changes, institutional priorities, and broader societal concerns related to justice and social welfare [cf. Irwin, 2021]. Such reflexive practice not only interrogates the implicit assumptions underpinning science communication but also highlights the need to appreciate how specific local conditions uniquely shape communication practices. As Horst and Michael [2011] suggest, science communication can be conceived of as an event emerging from a dynamic configuration of relations. These relations include not just human behaviours and perceptions, but also more-than-human entities, spaces and environments. This framing aligns with the ecology metaphor developed by Davies and Horst [2016], which maps the different lifeforms and niches of science communication and their interdependencies.

We build on this ecological thinking by proposing a complementary metaphor: *terroir*. Like ecology, terroir invites attention to interdependence and emergence, but it adds a deeper sensitivity to the situatedness, material specificity, and co-produced character of communication practices. Where ecology suggests networks and flows, terroir evokes place-based transformation: how local geology, culture, histories, climates and more-than-human presences shape, constrain, and enable particular 'vintages' of science communication. The metaphor of terroir implies not just that communication is shaped by

context, but that it is created through an entangled inhabitation of place, with enduring traces of that place in the product. This deepening of the metaphor allows us to explore how science communication is not only ecological, but also embodied, embedded, and expressive of local specificity, and thus attuned to both heritage and emergence.

1 ▪ Terroir as a metaphor for science communication: people, places, environments and the more-than-human

The term terroir is traditionally used to describe the unique interplay of environmental and human factors that shape the character of agricultural products [Ducarme, 2025]. It refers not only to the specific geo-climatic and ecological conditions in which a product is grown but also to the knowledge, skill, and cultural traditions of those who cultivate it, often passed down through generations. Terroir is most often associated with wine, although it also applies to other artisanal goods, such as single-origin coffee, speciality cheeses, and organic vegetables, where the specificity of place and process is central to their value and meaning [Paxson & Helmreich, 2014].

The task of a terroir agriculturalist is to 'craft the expression of their terroir' [Teil, 2012, p. 481]. This entails having an almost osmotic sense of the complex web of connections between geo-climatic characteristics, soil quality, microbiological flora and fauna, and the plants themselves, and integrating this sense with generations of expertise, agricultural science, practiced intuition, and feel for timing. Because it integrates human and nonhuman actors in this way, terroir has been described as a 'theory of how people and place, cultural tradition and landscape ecology, are mutually constituted over time' [Paxson, 2010, p. 444]. In other words, terroir is an expression of how humans (people and cultural traditions) and their natural environments (place and landscape ecology) continually shape and influence each other. In this way, terroir resists easy quantification, because it is shaped by micro-variables and localised differences that defy the definition of ideal conditions or gold standards [van Leeuwen, 2009]. The terroir craftsperson does not impose control but navigates this complexity. They learn to work with the contingencies and affordances of a particular time and place, rather than reducing them to fixed formulas. This creates tension between scientific and practical understandings of terroir:

> For scientists who are unable to reduce it to a stable list of determining factors, terroir is an unfounded notion, an imaginary social construction, and an economic barrier. Producers, on the other hand, along with the wider distribution network of terroir wines, consider terroir as a real object, although one whose manifestations cannot be evaluated using the same procedures as those of scientists [Teil, 2012, p. 478].

We propose that terroir offers a compelling metaphor for rethinking science communication — especially as an alternative to models that seek broadly applicable best practices. Like artisanal production, science communication emerges from, and is shaped by, its own terroir of human and non-human factors: disciplinary ways of doing, local priorities, institutional cultures, resources and memories, individual preferences, expertises and intuitions [cf. Horst & Michael, 2011]. The 'expression of terroir', in this metaphor, is thus the science

communicator's crafting of science communication initiatives, sometimes intentional and sometimes unconscious, based on critical reflection on context, relationality, and the very nature of knowledge itself. Seen in this light, terroir also helps explain why intuitive theories, anecdotal experiences, and local practices often hold valuable insights, even if they resist standardisation or generalisability. Such forms of knowing are not lesser or inferior; they are expressions of the particular worlds from which they emerge.

In proposing terroir as a metaphor, we challenge science communication researchers and practitioners to move beyond a search for universal solutions or standardised forms of impact measurement, and instead embrace more relational, embedded, and situated approaches. This entails recognising the interplay of people, places, histories, emotions, and material constraints and affordances that give rise to diverse ways of knowing and engaging. Like a wine that carries the trace of the land, science communication is at its most meaningful when it bears the expression of the terroir in which it unfolds.

Acknowledging terroir does not preclude evaluation, but it does change the terms on which evaluation is based. Even wines defined by terroir are routinely assessed and compared; however, these judgments are attuned to context and grounded in shared yet adaptable criteria that recognise the uniqueness of each expression. In a similar way, we advocate for forms of assessment in science communication that respect the specificities of place, publics, and practice. This is a way to cultivate nuanced and responsive forms of accountability, rather than relativising quality. Diversity should not be treated as a flaw to be corrected [cf. Davies et al., 2021]; rather, the richness and value of science communication lie in its difference and its responsiveness to the particular. While it is easy to argue that science communication is context specific, we argue that its greatest potential lies in its attunement to terroir.

2 ▪ Terroir: too narrow, too broad, too exclusive?

Introducing terroir as a metaphor for the science communication event raises a set of legitimate concerns. Might the notion be too narrow, invoking place-based nostalgia or parochialism? Too broad, capable of absorbing anything and therefore signifying little? Or too exclusive, privileging expertise and elite sensibilities? In the following, we respond to these challenges as a way to refine our metaphor and to open further avenues of exploration.

Is terroir too narrow? The metaphor's origins in viticulture and its frequent association with localism may suggest a bounded or introspective view. Bruno Latour [2016] famously critiqued terroir as a form of territorial nostalgia that, when mobilised politically, can mirror the reactionary limits of nationalism. Yet Latour's critique does not disqualify terroir as such. Rather, it urges us to rethink how we connect to place in a planetary era. Terroir offers a counterpoint to the high-speed global circulation of science communication practices by foregrounding the textures of place, presence, and relationality. It invites us to attend not only to institutions and audiences, but also to how air quality, building acoustics, weather and affect shape the science communication event. If this seems narrow, we argue that it is in fact a disciplined attention to the specificity of the event — one that allows us to broaden our scope.

Is terroir too broad? On the other hand, taken to its full extent, terroir can become overwhelming. If we consider its expanded meaning, from soil microbes and microclimates to farmers and farming traditions, global trade routes, and climate change, what doesn't

count as part of the terroir of a science communication event? Our intention is not to map these elements one to one (1:1) but to shift the frame in order to encourage attentiveness to factors that are often overlooked. For instance, in a street-level public engagement initiative, the position of the sun, traffic noise, or even the scent of a nearby bakery might alter the event's tone and uptake. Terroir helps us resist both downward reductionism (searching for singular causal variables) and upward generalisations (flattening context into abstract systems) [Harman, 2018]. Instead, it offers a vocabulary for cultivating discernment: learning to notice what might matter, and how, in each unique configuration.

Is terroir too exclusive? Terroir's association with connoisseurship, wine tasting, fine dining, and single-origin products may evoke elitism. Does invoking terroir imply that only a few selected experts can assess the terroir of a science communication event? We share this concern, and explicitly reject a narrow, gastronomic understanding of terroir. To work with a more imaginative and all-encompassing version of terroir, we turn to Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*. In these novels, a mysterious area known as *Area X* transforms all who enter it — humans, animals, landscapes — into part of a shifting, interconnected ecosystem. In a central passage in the second volume, one of the main characters uses the notion of terroir to describe this process of mutual transformation. Area X is thus a place that doesn't just influence but *absorbs* its inhabitants. In this speculative sense, terroir is not rarefied or exclusive; it is inescapable. It acts on everyone, mutating humans and non-humans to become compatible with it [VanderMeer, 2014; Sell, 2018]. Likewise, the terroir of a science communication event is not reserved for experts; it is co-experienced, consciously or not, by everyone participating in it.

Yet the situation is perhaps even more dizzying than this. If everyone is exposed to the terroir, that also includes us as researchers and practitioners, entangled and situated within what we study. If we stay with VanderMeers's imagery for a moment longer, we also see a parallel to this situation as the researchers venturing into Area X not only lose their separation from the environment but consequently also their alleged scientific objectivity. Indeed, within Area X, even language and communication become troubled [Sell, 2018]. To engage with and study the terroir calls for an embodied, situated and adaptive approach. If knowledge is embodied and situated [Haraway, 1988], why should science communication follow different logics of separation? To take the metaphor of terroir seriously involves realising that we are intertwined in a relational way of knowing that explores connections between place, practices, multisensory aesthetics, ethics, multispecies relations and knowledge [Rigobello & Evans, 2024]. A crucial question is then to consider how to attend to (or if we stay within its metaphorical frame, cultivate) the terroir of science communication.

We suggest that cultivating the terroir of science communication is an act of situated participation. As researchers, we do not stand outside the event we study but are always already inside it, shaped by institutional contexts, funding structures, physical spaces, personal values, and more-than-human relations. This recognition calls for what Haraway [1988] described as *situated knowledge*, namely a form of knowing that acknowledges its own partiality and positionality. In science communication, this acknowledgement means resisting the temptation to generalise prematurely and instead developing attuned methods that are responsive to the particularities of each context. It also means embracing a more participatory and dialogic stance, in which researchers become co-learners alongside practitioners and publics. This reflexive posture can enrich our understanding of how knowledge, communication, and place co-emerge, without undermining rigour. Just as terroir

must be cultivated through time, care, and responsiveness, so too must our approaches to studying it.

3 ▪ Cultivating a terroir of science communication

We believe that a fruitful way forward is to multiply the forms of knowledge we include in both the practice and analysis of science communication. This is a sometimes-vulnerable path to tread: it entails not just giving up epistemic authority but also admitting that we don't know from the start what kinds of knowing might turn out to be important. In this spirit, we suggest that reframing science communication through the metaphor of terroir has wide-ranging implications, not only for how we understand science communication, but also for how we evaluate, fund, design, and research it.

Terroir draws our attention to the subtle, often overlooked conditions that shape science communication events: atmospheric factors like light, sound, and scent; affective registers like trust, joy, or discomfort; and more-than-human presences like weather, infrastructure, or landscape. Recognising these dimensions means rethinking how science communication is judged. Rather than seeking universal indicators of success, a terroir-informed approach asks: What matters here? To whom? And why? Evaluation becomes less about replicability and more about attunement to context, to audience, to the evolving ecology of meaning-making [cf. Leavy, 2020]. Similarly, funding models might need to shift toward supporting slower, locally embedded, co-created initiatives, which prioritise resonance over reach.

This reorientation also carries implications for science communication research. If we, as researchers, are part of the terroir we study, then we cannot act as detached observers. We are shaped by the histories, institutions, and sensory geographies of the events we analyse. Taking this seriously requires methodological reflexivity, but also methodological experimentation. Terroir resists purely cognitive or discursive analysis; it demands methods that can attend to the sensory, the embodied, the affective, the layered. It invites tools from ethnography, design research, sensory studies — and, we suggest, the arts.

In our current research program, *Addressing Sustainability with Arts-Based Science Communication*, we explore co-creative, arts-based practices as a way to surface hidden dimensions of sustainability science communication [Achiam et al., 2024]. These include emotions, bodily experience, and the aesthetic atmosphere of communication events — dimensions often absent in mainstream accounts. Arts-based approaches are not merely decorative or illustrative; they can function as epistemic tools, helping publics and practitioners alike to encounter science in multisensory, situated, and ethically complex ways. From the perspective of terroir, they appear less as alternatives to science communication, and more as deeply fitting guides, connectors, and participants, especially when science communication is reconceived as the unfolding of a richly entangled event rather than the delivery of a clear message.

We hope to gather others working in this spirit to collectively cultivate a more textured, situated, and plural science communication practice — one that values not only clarity and accuracy but also resonance, responsiveness, and care. Perhaps the imagery of terroir calls for us to move beyond a focus on the *science* of science communication and begin developing an *arts* of science communication that acknowledges complexity without retreating into relativism, and that foregrounds connection without erasing difference. This is

not a rejection of evidence or method, but a call to expand our repertoire in order to notice more, sense more, and know differently.

Acknowledgments

This research was made possible by funding from the Novo Nordisk Foundation, grant number NNF220C0078707. The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

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How to cite

Achiam, M., Grünfeld, M., Vitting-Seerup, S., Jensen, J. T. and Whiteley, L. (2025). 'Towards a *terroir* approach to science communication and its evidencing'. *JCOM* 24(07), Y01. https://doi.org/10.22323/1611202511104104659.

ISSN 1824-2049. Published by SISSA Medialab. jcom.sissa.it