Rethinking the role of the Information Officer in S&T communication

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Both managers and public information officers (PIOs) at research institutions and research-funding agencies uniformly suffer from poor understanding of the role that communications play in mediating the organization’s interests with broader public audiences. Often, PIOs are viewed within their organizations as in-house journalists, more concerned about adhering to journalistic values and media ethics than they are about preserving the scientific credibility of their researcher colleagues. Conversely, PIOs are mostly likely to be perceived by the public (and by the public’s proxy, reporters) as uncritical spokespersons for the institution, keeping to the company line and insulating decision-makers from public scrutiny. Based on a multi-year study of “best practices” in science communication by a blue-ribbon panel of practitioners and theorists, I propose a new way of conceptualizing the role of the PIO as "manager of the trust portfolio". In a society in which public trust of scientists and scientific institutions appears to be a more consistent indicator of public support for S&T than does scientific literacy, the robustness of the trust portfolio managed by PIOs -- including public understanding, science and social credibility, and public participation in scientific decision-making - is critical to the scientific endeavor.