



Commissioner Janez POTOČNIK

*Opening Speech*  
*ECSITE Annual Conference 2009*

Check Against Delivery  
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

*Milan, Italy*

*4<sup>th</sup> June 2009*

Minister, Dear Friends, President of the region of Lombardy, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me here today to the annual gathering of ECSITE members. This year's conference is not a "business as usual" event. [As other speakers have said] ECSITE is celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> birthday today! I do know what being 20 means since this is the age of one of my sons. You may have doubts about the future but you feel strong, you are full of plans and energy. The world belongs to you and life is just fun! I hope this conference has all of these positive points.

This conference is also special because it is hosted here in the wonderful surroundings of the Leonardo Da Vinci museum of Science and Technology in the beautiful city of Milan.

It is more than 500 years since Leonardo da Vinci first came to Milan but he remains a truly inspirational figure to us all – from bestselling novels and Hollywood films to scientists and European Union funding programmes!

Devising plans for a machine not too dissimilar to a modern helicopter in an age of horse drawn carts and sailing ships AND creating some of the most famous and captivating paintings in history: it still astounds us that a single person could be a scientist, mathematician, engineer, inventor, anatomist, painter, sculptor, architect, botanist, musician and writer - probably the most famous historical figure to have truly linked "science and arts", a topic which some of you know, is close to my heart.

He seems to have had one of the most enquiring minds in all history, truly interested in knowing everything – always asking questions and acquiring new knowledge.

And it is the curiosity of mankind as a species – that has driven science and technological progress forward to where we are now. A world where progress has made many lives so much easier, healthier and more productive. And that progress will continue – you can't uninvent inventions.

But it is also a fragile world whose very existence is threatened by technological exploitation and over consumption of resources. And yet – it is science and research that enables us to see these looming dangers and will help us find ways of reducing our footprint on this planet. Changing our behaviour as individuals will certainly be a major part of that and the more people understand the scientific rationale the easier it will be to make the changes.

As I have said many times - we need to communicate and engage the public more about science and research. We need the general public to understand that science is important and why (for example to mitigate the consequences of climate change).

We need every person in Europe to appreciate the essential need for investment in science – both public and private, especially in these times of crises. We need to explain the many benefits that science and research can bring – how it can help create prosperity and jobs – helping us out of the current difficulties and creating the foundations of the future prosperity by building a knowledge economy and society.

We also need to inspire more young people, especially girls, to consider scientific careers, so that we have enough researchers in the future. And we need to involve the general public more in the big scientific challenges we face in society today. There is still a suspicion towards science in parts of society and it is sometimes in a limited way justified - in the sense that there are developing areas such as bio-tech or nano-tech – which potentially raise important ethical issues. We do need to address such issues and their governance and we need to engage wider society as part of that.

But often it is because of a lack of understanding – which you, ECSITE members, can help to address. Because you are one of the most approachable faces of science – you can reach parts of the general public that other science communication actors can't - inspiring them - young and old - with the excitement of current scientific knowledge and the promise of future discoveries.

Science and research will always, by definition be forward looking – about discovering new things and adding and improving our knowledge. But when communicating in general about science and in trying to inspire new science enthusiasts, we can take inspiration from the things that science has already achieved and the technology we have already developed.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I said at the beginning of my intervention, today is a celebration day. And there cannot be any birthday without a present! I have not brought parcels with me. But I have some good news for the ECSITE network and its partners, namely the European Science Events Association, the European Regions and Innovation network, and the Science Communication Observatory in Barcelona. Some months ago, you submitted for European co-financing a proposal called PLACES which is about bringing together existing networks of science centres and museums, science events and regional authorities. I am very happy to announce that your proposal has been favourably evaluated for funding by our independent experts. An official negotiation letter was sent to you last week and must have reached you.

But there is another good piece of news! There is a second proposal in which ECSITE is involved and which has been also recommended for funding. I am speaking about the 'TWIST' proposal on women in science. A negotiation letter was also sent last week to the Danish Experimentarium that coordinates the proposal.

So congratulations for the quality of your proposals which the European Commission will, if everything goes well during the negotiations, be proud to support. I wish you every success with them.

Your role has evolved and is still evolving: from having been places simply devoted to the conservation and showcasing of historical scientific knowledge, to becoming demonstrators of technology in action and theatres of mediation and negotiation between the scientific community and society at large. You are a 'bridge' between the 'doing of science' and

the public at large. And the work you are doing goes much wider than is immediately obvious.

The European Commission appreciates your commitment to science and we would like an even greater participation of ECSITE members in our activities.

This appreciation is true for the whole Commission but it is even stronger coming from me since I am a regular visitor of the House of Experiments in Ljubljana, which is an ECSITE member. No later than last Saturday I participated at their Science Festival and I had the privilege to take part in an experiment myself – I ran on a sort of non-newton fluid mixture of starch and water and learned something new. And the most important: I had fun while doing it!

It was fascinating to see how youngsters can, thanks to these experiments, more easily understand difficult mathematical and chemical formulas.

Indeed I have always been convinced that curiosity is in our genes. Unfortunately in too many cases it tends to die away when we grow up. This is because of the way we raise and educate our children, the way we work and live does not support innovative thinking and doing. We cannot change this overnight. But it is worthwhile to strive to awaken this dormant passion.

Networks like yours play an increasing role in activities devoted to science and society to which I attach the greatest importance. I strongly believe that if the public does not understand what science does and does for them, or if the public feels threatened by science, we need to find another job!

So thank you for the work ECSITE has accomplished so far in order to popularise science and technology and make them attractive to a large audience.

I wish you all a successful conference and a very happy birthday!